# BBR

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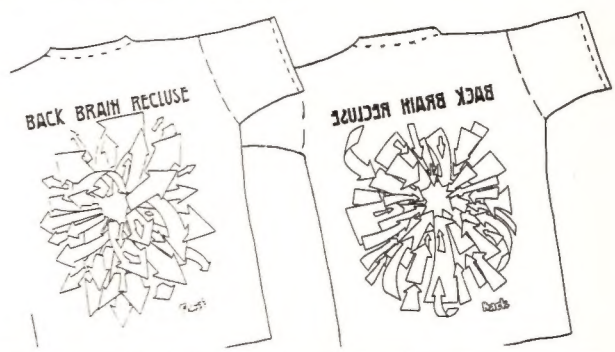


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**BACK BRAIN RECLUSE**

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# A free market for SF?

As we enter the new decade the sorry state of SF has become a widespread preoccupation, to judge from the dissent now spreading among writers, editors and readers alike, at home and in the States.

The most recent issue of the American critical magazine *Science Fiction Eye* (#5, July 1989, reviewed in this issue of **BBR**), is a good case in point. As one of the judges for the Philip K Dick Award in 1987/8, Charles Platt was forced to read through a full year's output of SF novels. In his article "The Rape of Science Fiction", he lets rip with considerable ire and venom at the lack of quality he found there, and considers the essential death of the paperback original, long the staple of SF publishing.

One of the culprits he blames for this is a change of priorities in the publishing establishment itself:

> In the 1970s, as large corporations bought up publishing companies and started demanding greater profitability, editors generally were being told to think in more commercial terms. Science fiction had been sheltered from such pressures while it remained a literary backwater for which no one had high expectations. (p.47)

But then, with SF bestsellers attracting commercial attention to the category, editors in fear of their jobs reluctantly learned to stomach the "literary junk food" that Judy-Lynn del Rey was already proving to be commercially successful.

Elsewhere in the same magazine, John Shirley also attributes the same faults to the current big press market:

> A major financial retrenchment in the SF field is taking place. Some publishers – Ace, for example – are cutting back their lines. Dell hasn't got an SF line at all. And the others are making more conservative choices, opting exclusively for big names or for the sort of pulp trash that sells reliably (p.32)

and suggests that the fantastic drive for profits demanded by the multinational corporations leaves publishers with no patience for the slow process of cultivating an audience for a good writer. In this atmosphere, he concludes, it is impossible for young progressive SF writers to flourish.

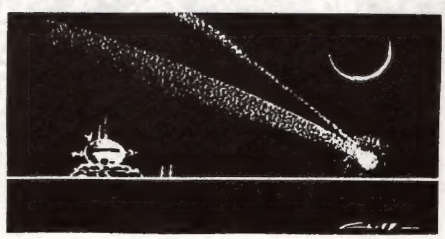
At home meanwhile, there is a similar consensus of opinion. In the most recent *Critical Wave* (#15, February 1990), Jane Johnson, SF and fantasy editor at Unwin Hyman, one of the UK's few remaining independent publishing houses, likens the trend of profit over product to the death of the dinosaurs. Short-sighted and slow to respond, the lumbering corporate monsters kill off the market with their greed, and themselves then die away as the small mammals take over.

For John Shirley, the assessment of material according to its commercial worth rather than any literary talent means that SF stories are now locked into generic and formulaic strictures not found in other types of fiction:

> SF writers are usually expected to produce 'sympathetic' protagonists – that is, characters a straitlaced middle-class male can identify with – up-beat endings, a thematic reiteration of comfortable, standardized values, Libertarian or Republican politics, and competent but workmanlike prose ... All this is either harmless or to the good, but it's hardly a world-class goal. (p.32)

For those writers who aspire to higher goals however, these austere restrictions mean that works of a more far-sighted and wide-ranging nature will not get published. Charles Platt notes that many established SF writers, such as Rudy Rucker, Marc Laidlaw, John Sladek, Thomas M. Disch, Samuel R. Delany and John Shirley, are finding it hard to get published now, whilst Shirley himself reports the same sad situation with Peter Lamborn Wilson's "masterful fantasy novel" *Hunter's Moon* unable to find a publisher.

Faced with these problems, writers have a number of options available. Some decide to give up writing altoge-



ther to concentrate on other activities, whilst others are leaving the genre, taking SF's best ideas with them to where they'll be better appreciated. The most recent novels of Michael Moorcock and J.G. Ballard are typical examples of this. When once SF was renowned for its freedom of thought, where "anything is possible", the corporate category structures have forced a brain-drain of many of the genre's most brilliant writers.

According to Shirley, another solution to present restrictions has been to remain within the genre but to sidestep conventional publishing outlets:

> There are good number of new SF writers chafing at the current restrictions. They aspire towards a grown-up fiction, or in some cases simply freewheeling fiction, and they are insisting on finding venues for it – even if they have to publish those venues themselves. The cycle has come full circle. *The alternative press is back*, almost literally with a vengeance. (p.32)

It's these small independent publishers, Shirley's new "alternative press", who have taken on the rôle of Jane Johnson's "small mammals", picking up the pieces of the old regime, ready to forge ahead with new ideas, new strength, and new directions.

Increasingly, writers are turning to the independent press to let them publish material that 'professional' editors reject simply because they think it won't sell. Ian Watson, Adrian Cole and Chris Evans are just some of the established writers who have expressed their appreciation of the creative freedom afforded by the smaller publishers. Witness the success of Mark Ziesing's publishing efforts in the USA, netting writers such as Howard Waldrop, Iain Banks, Ian Watson and Wayne Allen Sallee.

In the UK, publishers like Morrigan and Kerosina Books are fulfilling a similar role to Ziesing. But also like Ziesing, they are pitching their product into the hardback or specialist collectors' market, with a price tag to match.

There's nothing wrong with opting for hardbacks and their assurance of quality in a field where quality is otherwise lacking, but once again they represent a restriction of the market. Whereas "part of the funky charm of SF has always been the paperback original", prompt admission to new SF is now a luxury good restricted to a privileged elite; those who do not have the money must either "wait a year for the paperback, or stand in line at the library" (Stephen Brown, *SF Eye* #5, p.5).

Bruce Sterling is yet another critic in *SF Eye* #5 who bemoans the sorry state of SF. Like John Shirley, he advocates a way forward that relies on a recognition of individual expression rather than rigid category structures.

Sterling suggests that SF is now burnt out, and in its place proposes a new genre more appropriate to life in the late 20th century, which he dubs 'slipstream'. Comprised of works whose idiosyncracy defies classification under current category structures, so causing them to be "remaindered with frantic haste", slipstream's criteria are primarily based on the power of recommendation: "This isn't SF, but it sure ain't mainstream and I think you might like it, okay?" (p.78)

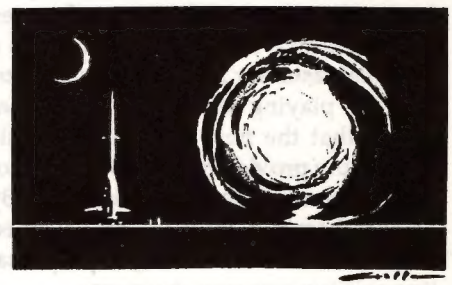
Whilst preparing his essay Sterling began collecting these private lists, and his impressive master-list of 173 books by 114 authors ranges from Isabel Allende through J.G. Ballard to Lawrence Durrell, Max Frisch, Günther Gräss, Doris Lessing, Norman Mailer, Chris Priest, Salman Rushdie, Lucius Shepard, John Updike, Kurt Vonnegut and Don Webb. Many of these books are what Sterling calls "left-handed works by authors safely established in other genres".

By the very nature of its foundation in personal recommendation, slipstream transcends existing category structures and the literary xenophobia that they promote and perpetuate. To look further afield and be prepared to learn from other types of writing presupposes a maturity of outlook that SF currently lacks. The basis of recommendation also presupposes a maturity of outlook which accepts that just because something is not to one's personal taste does not automatically mean that it is 'bad', merely that it might be 'different'. In the same way, just because works are rejected by commercial houses does not necessarily imply inferior quality.

The one and only time that SF has had the courage to stop and look around at other types of writing was during the New Wave, with effects so widespread their influence continues to be felt more than two decades later. SF is a movement and all movements must *move*, for without that continual process of change and evolution you are left with stagnation. For that reason alone I disagree with Charles Platt's assertion that New Wave's long-term influence was "degrading" for SF (p.46).

Perhaps the only high spots since New Wave have been the phenomena of cyberpunk and *Interzone*, each of which looked as if it would set the standard for a new and vibrant SF for the 1980s.

Yet both have been the victim of their own success, the former exploited to exhaustion by its corporate big brother, the latter elevated by its monopoly of the market to the level of the establishment it once sought to sidestep.



*Interzone* started out in the Spring of 1982 with honorable intentions. In his editorial of the premier issue, David Pringle stated:

> We intend to run stories by new writers. We believe that the nurturing of new authors is one of the principal reasons for the *necessity* of this magazine. Established writers – by definition – have established markets; publishers are willing to invest in their works; they have proved themselves. ... We wish to enlarge the opportunities for the emergence of new writers; we want to prepare the ground for major talents to come. (#1, p.2)

As the only British magazine paying substantial amounts for contributions, however, *Interzone* attracts the first option on the majority of new SF stories written in this country, regardless of whether those stories are suited to its editorial tastes. Similarly, its monopoly status has meant that it has attracted all the readers, regardless of whether or not its content is entirely suited to *their* tastes.

This monopoly on the attention of readers and writers alike put *Interzone* in

a 'no-lose' situation in which their success was practically guaranteed. That the magazine *has* proved to be a successful publishing venture is clearly visible in its editors' decision to move up to a monthly schedule in April 1990.

But that decision to go monthly is itself a symptom of how *Interzone*'s success has run away with itself. In justifying the inclusion of original pieces of fiction in the *Interzone* anthology rather than bringing them first to the readers of the magazine, David Pringle asserts that "the answer is simply that we have too much good material in hand" and that "more and more worthwhile material comes through *Interzone*'s letterbox" (#30, p.74).

If *Interzone* are having trouble coping even with the volume of material that they *do* like, then what of the material that is not to their taste but still of 'professional' quality? With no room for even the occasional 'adventurous' story as a potential taster for reader reaction, *Interzone* are playing safe every time. That means that the new monthly schedule will simply provide readers with more of what they are already familiar with. By default therefore, *Interzone* has assumed the establishment mentality of perpetuating existing category structures.

Even though they play safe in every issue, *Interzone*'s editors appear to lack the courage of their convictions, to believe that the fiction they have selected is good enough to sell the magazine. Instead they seem to find it necessary to resort to features on well-known commercial authors such as Stephen Donaldson, Terry Pratchett and even Douglas Adams in order to attract readers. Whilst these articles and interviews may well be of interest to the discerning fiction reader, their greater importance to the editors is evidenced by the size with which these big names are splashed across the cover. Whereas once it was *Interzone*'s intention to promote *new* writers because "established writers – by definition – have established markets", that role seems now to have taken more of a back seat.

In this way, *Interzone*'s characteristics as a purveyor of SF are identical to those of the establishment. Those authors of 'professional' calibre rejected for not being 'suitable' earlier are again forced to reassess their attitudes, priorities and futures as writers. Furthermore, because of the waiting list for publication, writers who have already been published in the magazine will have a long wait before another appearance: again, there is no facility for the slow process of cultivating and audience for a good writer. The readers, meanwhile, are again restricted to the fiction that best suits someone else's category structures. Ultimately, one alternative is no alternative.

One cannot blame *Interzone* for wanting to ensure the magazine's continued commercial success. They've worked hard for it and deserve to reap the fruits of their labours.

Of course, they've not been without their critics. Whilst wishing to "develop within the tradition of the best British magazines of the past" (#1 p.2), *Interzone* has nonetheless eschewed the option of following in the iconoclastic footsteps of *New Worlds* (Editorial, #3). That its editors' tastes happen to lean more closely towards commercial SF has led people such as John Shirley to comment:

> While it's mature and literary, *Interzone* is not particularly cutting-edge, often quails at publishing true SFU and the punkier SF. They wimp out fairly often.

That *Interzone has* become institutionalized must be the prime reason for the sudden upsurge of new British magazines, many of whom are prepared to pay comparable if not superior rates for contributions.

Yet with *Interzone* established in the public eye for so long now as British commercial magazine publishing's SF representative, all these independent publishers are confronted with the same vicious circle: if a product is by definition an alternative to 'commercial' material, it will be automatically rejected for distribution for being 'uncommercial', meaning unprofessional and second-rate. Cyberpunk managed to penetrate that defensive armour, only to be turned around and itself exploited to exhaustion by the media moguls.

Without effective distribution, how does one reach an audience wide enough to ensure the continued survival of the magazine? As the editors of *The Gate* have already discovered to their cost, distributors are reluctant to fully underwrite an unknown title (*Critical Wave*, #14, p.4); the New SF Alliance, meanwhile, have yet to receive a single order resulting from the deal with Titan announced in **BBR** #14.

If access to the casual browser is denied, the independents are forced to rely on a discerning public and the spread of recommendations by word of mouth in order to maintain and increase circulation.

That brings us right back to Bruce Sterling's slipstream definition, the maturity to transcend category structures and to recognise that just because something is not to one's personal taste does not automatically mean it is 'bad', merely that it might be 'different'.

Until quite recently, *Interzone* seemed reluctant to accept the work and achievements of other publishers in this way. As a result, a number of independent editors have complained of the casual dismissal of their publications as "fanzines" or at best "semi-prozines", apparently because they do not pay as much as *Interzone* and must therefore be of inferior quality. Instead, they assert that their magazines continue to play a vital role in the development of new writers, publishing many rising stars whose discovery has then been claimed by *Interzone* for itself.

Although to protect the market from one's competitors may make sound business sense in the short term, it is no excuse for the elitist attitude other editors contest, and in the long term it creates a closed economy in which 'value' becomes meaningless. However much *Interzone* may have chosen to bury their heads and those of their readers in the sand, the other independents have *not* gone away, and if anything are thriving as never before. *Interzone* seem finally to have realised this, and are now slowly abandoning their market protection for a policy of greater market freedom which makes even better business sense, both for *Interzone* and for British magazine publishing in general.

In recognizing and publicizing the

formation of the NSFA last year (#33, p.4), *Interzone* has started a process of breaking down the barriers between its readers and the other smaller independents. To judge from recent response, those readers who have already managed to venture beyond *Interzone* have been surprised and encouraged by the wealth of activity and the range of publications that they may not have imagined existed before.

There is no reason whatsoever why the prospect of new magazines paying comparable rates should fill *Interzone* with trepidation. Instead, the new markets will make their job so much easier, by taking away the unnecessary workload created by material not suited to their needs, but which until now has been sent to them because they are the only SF magazine listed in *The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*. That way *Interzone* will be able to spend more time concentrating on what they do best, and without those distractions their corporate machine will in turn run so much more smoothly. Again, some recent correspondence received by **BBR** indicates that unsuccessful contributors to *Interzone* are now being alerted to these other possible outlets for their material.

This new policy of greater openness and co-operation between the various strata of magazine publishing can only be to the greater good of British SF. By encouraging readers to experiment and expand their tastes in this way, creating a more mature outlook and greater appreciation of the variety of imaginative fiction, *Interzone* will surely gain the greater respect of not only their readers but their peers in publishing as well.

All the new magazines reflect a similar need for expression, and recognise that the reader deserves this choice of reading material. That sense of cohesion in concept rather than content is perhaps the main reason for the phenomenal success of the NSFA so far. Even though the tastes of the member editors differ vastly within the Alliance, they all acknowledge that though not everything is going to be to everyone's taste, the reader is guaranteed to find something to his liking. Each magazine is a reflection of its editor's personal slipstream checklist, and so each one is different.

Never before has there been such variety in the British SF magazine market. Now, more than ever, there is no reason for newcomers to SF to be turned away from the genre because they cannot find anything they like, or for old hands to lose interest because it has lost its sparkle.

Therein lies the true excitement and potential of the independent scene – call it small press, alternative press, SF underground, slipstream or whatever. People have been bombarded with commercially motivated pulp for so long that they've got used to it. But now, more and more readers are discovering that they *do* have a choice. A snowball effect is occurring that will cause considerable changes in SF as we know it today, changes that have the potential to be as widespread and long-lasting as New Wave was twenty years ago.

There is no doubt that these changes are long overdue, for without change you have decadence, and decadence leads to the fall of most empires, and the death of the overweight corporate dinosaurs.

The independents, the small mammals, are coming of age now, eager to forge ahead into new territories. Some of them won't survive, but it cannot be long before a new breed emerges that is both accessible and visionary enough to take the mantle of "the first truly great SF magazine of the 1990s". ❑

New magazines which have recently or are about to come into existence include the following:

**REM:** Arthur Straker, 19 Sandringham Road, Willesden, London NW2 5EP
**EXUBERENCE:** Jason Smith, 34 Croft Close, Chipperfield, Herts WD4 9PA
**H:** Mark Haw, 50 Back Hill, Ely, Cambs CB7 4BZ
**NIGHTFALL:** Noel Hannan, 58 Bleasdale Road, Coppenhall, Crewe CW1 9PZ
**UNTITLED:** Andrew Coates, 19 Greenacre Road, Wednesbury Oak, Tipton, West Midlands DY4 0AR.

Some of these magazines are paying for contributions by copies, whilst others are offering quite substantial rates for material. If you're interested in contributing or subscribing, then send an SAE or 2 IRCs for more information. ❑

## Onward and upward

Welcome to the new large-format **BBR**. The move up to A4 is part of the structured development of the magazine which started last issue, and which continues in **BBR** #16 when we start paying for contributions.

We obviously hope that this process of improvements will help to attract a wider readership whilst, of course, continuing to present vibrant and progressive new fiction from across the spectrum in a deserving and lasting environment.

Support and best wishes for the new-look **BBR** have come from many quarters, including well-known writers such as Christopher Priest, Ian Watson, David Langford, Christopher Evans, Maxim Jakubowski, Garry Kilworth and Michael Moorcock.

Cherry Wilder also sent the following encouraging verses:

A Limerick

There was a young fellow called Reed
Whose associates cried: "Yes indeed!
He's reclusive, he's brainy,
He digs films with Lon Cheyney ...
He'll give us the SF we need!"

Extract from *The Ballad of the Goodly Scroll*

The goodly fen of Angle-Lond
Sat round and made greàt moan:
"Oh where will we find a magazine
Besides ye Interzone?"
Then up and spake some elder knights
Who passed the flowing bowl:
"Call up Sir Chris of Chesterfield ...
He puts out a Goodly Scroll!" ❑

## Change of address

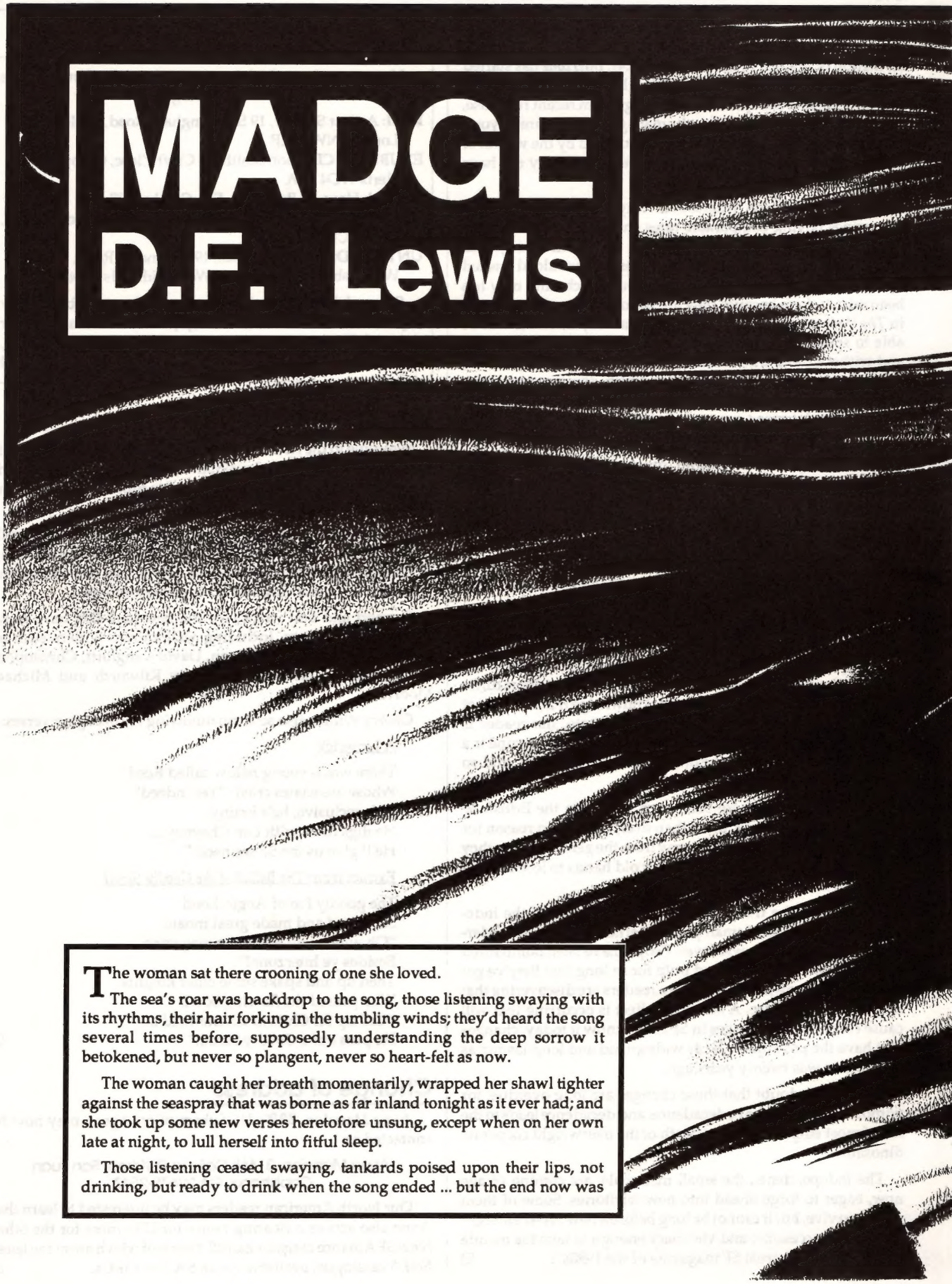
Anne Marsden, **BBR**'s US Subscription Agent, may now be contacted at:

Anne Marsden, 31468 Calle la Purisima, San Juan Capistrano, CA 92675-2547.

Our North American readers may be interested to learn that Anne also acts as a clearing house for US orders for the other New SF Alliance magazines, full details of which are in the latest NSFA catalogue, available for an SAE or 2 IRCs. ❑

# MADGE

## D.F. Lewis



The woman sat there crooning of one she loved.

The sea's roar was backdrop to the song, those listening swaying with its rhythms, their hair forking in the tumbling winds; they'd heard the song several times before, supposedly understanding the deep sorrow it betokened, but never so plangent, never so heart-felt as now.

The woman caught her breath momentarily, wrapped her shawl tighter against the seaspray that was borne as far inland tonight as it ever had; and she took up some new verses heretofore unsung, except when on her own late at night, to lull herself into fitful sleep.

Those listening ceased swaying, tankards poised upon their lips, not drinking, but ready to drink when the song ended ... but the end now was

so unpredictable. Many held their breath; but amid such winds as blew along those coasts, it was possible for the lungs to respire without the consent of mind or body.

The song entered areas to which none would dare listen, given the choice. Many hoped that the growing thunder of the encroaching seas would deafen ...

Later, in her cot, as the storm neared its peak, she attempted lullaby after lullaby, not only to take sleep upon herself from the pitch darkness, but also gently to entice her partner for the night into a rest which, he told her, would help him to work the trawler through the next week or so. They had loved long and hard since day-repair, so surely sleep would be easy.

He whispered:

"Your song was hard to bear, this night, Madge."

"I could hardly bear it myself, but I was determined to get through all the verses ..."

"The others did not know where to put their faces ... But I hoped, I really hoped, you would choose me tonight, and you must have read as much in my eyes, for here I be."

"I needed someone strong this night of all nights, not only because the storm is fiercer than I at least can remember, but my mother once told me that if I sang the song straight through, without break, he of which it speaks will know he can finally rest – but will need to see me for the last time. And, if he comes tonight, I want him to know I'm happy, strongly serviced by the likes of you."

"Madge, don't you think he'll be bitter seeing me share your cot?"

"Ghosts can never be bitter, man, they can only hope for the happiness of those they leave behind. That's where all the tales and songs be wrong."

"If you say so ..."

The storm hurtled louder than the quaking of the Earth at the end of time.

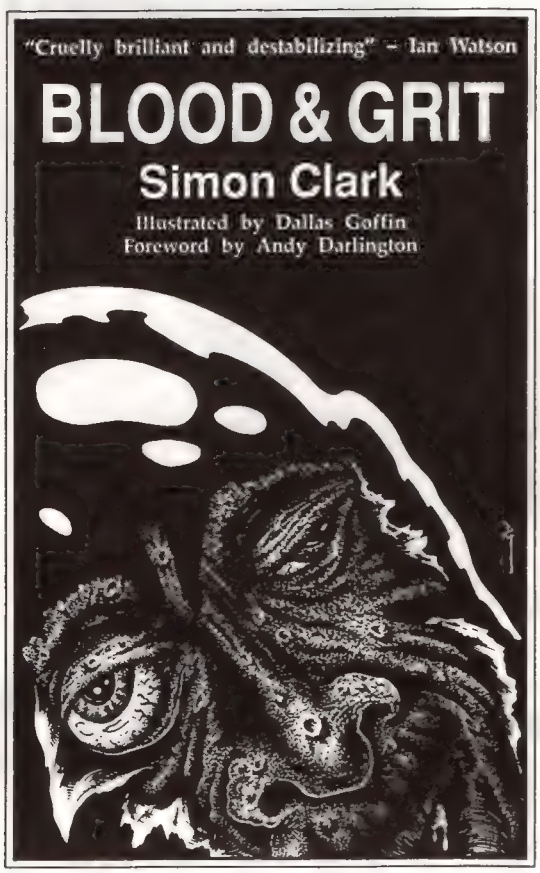
She wrapped herself tighter into his arms, feeling that his breath was staunched, like hers, for the duration of the moment's sanctity.

Day-break, with the storm quickly passing over, the rest of the village woke to hear her renewed crooning. This time it was with a morning's melody and lightsome words.

Madge's mother found her still locked in the twine of the man's white unmoving limbs, as she carolled of a new ghost ...

The tides were too far out to hear. But, when her song was done, she listened to the squelch of boots as men mumbled into their beards and dragged their boats through new-made troughs to the distant sea. ❑

Des Lewis is a regular contributor to **BBR**, and his work is to be found in many small press magazines. A recent issue of *Dagon* was devoted to the man and his work, with one of the stories subsequently selected to appear in this year's edition of DAW's *The Year's Best Horror Stories*.



"Cruelly brilliant and destabilizing" – Ian Watson
BLOOD & GRIT
Simon Clark
Illustrated by Dallas Goffin
Foreword by Andy Darlington

## New from BBR Books:

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# LOVEGUN

Evening came down, in grey. There. The first-floor window, at the left, the bedroom, the window flooding with orange, a brave response to the gusting of the cold wind. Except that up there they weren't feeling the wind. He pulled with concrete-white fingers at the collar of his coat. They called him Capricorn. Here it's October. The last bright day now painted over, roughly in the sky as if by cowboy gods, after an afternoon of cold clean sunlight and golden leaves. All the day in these shoes and this grey suit and this dark coat. Under the wintering sun it had been too hot, heavy; now it was too cold, too thin against the hastening wind. The wind whispered to him to hurry, but he stood waiting. There across the street, still the orange light, below the black lines of strung telephone wires. He kept his eyes to the darkening sky. Somewhere birds were chattering, the way birds chatter, and footsteps, the way footsteps step. He shrugged harder into the coat. Hands into pockets, one meeting nothing, one meeting an object colder than anything.

He ran his fingers along it.

In the apartment – he listened, via an *a* he had installed two nights before – they were discussing something. He could not quite make out what it was they were talking about. It did not interest him. Perhaps in the morning he would go over the tapes. Maybe he would learn something. There was always something to learn. "Aristotle," she was saying, sounding drunk in an intellectual, girlish fashion, "was the last one of them. After that –"

"All the Greeks were dead from syphilis before they were thirty." The man, a bastard with a loud voice and probably an empty glass, interrupted her. "That's been proved –"

In the dark street, he ceased listening. A truck hauled by, uphill, in very low gear, bright lights in front and cautious darkness along its side, as it moved past. Its growling sounds died as it turned at the top, away.

He felt the quiet like a close blanket. The cold like a shape. He remembered the golden blinding sinking sun, earlier, across town, warm on his skin in the park, where he had waited. All day in the grey suit.

Cold like a shape, fingers, pocket, shape like cold, darkening. Sick of their early-alcohol slurred voices he switched out the *a*. Moved.

The man did not recognise him. At the door, in the cheap *v* – its wires hung loose from the panel, inviting any maniac to fool the system – could've fed in a plastic picture of her brother, just to satisfy them – maybe she had no brother – he smiled, and said he was a friend of hers. He heard them dully conferring behind the door, in the hallway. The man was drunk enough to be suspicious, she was drunk enough to want to make the man jealous. Finally – without looking at the *v*, obviously – she opened up the door for him. Immediately she recognised him – he had been at Falk's place once, seen her there – but he was through the door. She tumbled back. The man did not know what was happening. He clubbed the man across the front of the head. The man fell. The hallway was so cramped he had to half-climb over the slumped body to get further into the apartment; by then she was around a corner, probably going for a gun or a knife. He had found both – and removed both – two nights before. He came around the corner, the cold lovegun already in his hand.

She was not going for anything; maybe she knew they were gone, her weapons; maybe she knew they would be useless anyway. She cowered

MARK HAW >>>>>>

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from him, against a wall, behind a sofa. He saw two glasses – one empty, one imprinted with red lips, and half full – and he saw books, strewn around the sofa, big fat books, open. He saw paintings in gloss spread, huge women, darkened old canvas backgrounds, everything the shade of blood, old blood. The light was too bright, reading light, not loving light. "Please," she said, in a voice half silence.

"Falk," he said slowly, "wanted you to have this."

"– it's him you should –"

He fired. Love hit her, in the stomach; she folded, sliding away.

He remembered golden sun sinking, earlier that afternoon. The skies were black, and the wind. He walked quickly away, downhill. He remembered leaves. Capricorn. In October. The last bright day.

The next morning the beeping of the *v-a* woke him. His eyes opened. For thirty seconds he waited, not blinking, an obscure automatic awareness gripping him, like the danger instinct of an animal. Vestige of an old occupation, before – the beeping ceased. He blinked, breathed out. Closed his eyes.

A minute later the *v-a* beeped again. Expressionless, he answered.

"I can't get used to you having no picture," Falk's voice said, tinily, crackling. (He had ripped the *v* wires out himself, on moving into the flat a month ago.) "It's kinda unnerving. You know? Still, guess that's your image, huh? Like calling yourself Capricorn. Or whatever it was. Listen, she's here. OK? Guess that concludes our – deal. She came about one this morning. Christ, whatever it is you do – that gun thing of yours – it really works, right? You know, I was almost thinking you were a fraud. I even had you watched." He half-started. "Well, I tried to. You slippery bastard. I like you, Capricorn, you got some style. And you give results. You – listen, you wanna come by some time and collect your cash? I mean, she doesn't have to be here – would she remember you? I like you. You come by. Maybe I'll have some more business to put your way –"

"I told you," he said flatly. His throat was dry. "Only one."

"Shit, I don't mean me. Man, I can barely handle her now. Couldn't take another, you know what I mean?" Rusted, distorted laugh, Falk was a loud man, like – he realised – the other man, who'd been with her in the apartment. Maybe she chose them like that. Maybe they chose her. Maybe neither. "But I

got friends. I got friends who'd be real interested. What do you say? I mean, this is so big we could even end up partners. I can drum up your business –"

"No," he said. "Put the money where I told you. Don't call me again." He shut it off, got to the sink, spat out what tasted like dust. He drank water, which was too warm, waited for the pipe to clear, drank some which was colder. He leaned on the sink, breathing slowly.

He wiped the night's tapes, all the tapes from the last two days. Towards noon, when the lunchtime crowds were out, flooding like rivers, milling like brainless insects, he walked a twisted loop around the hills of the city, dropping her gun and her two knives and the wiped tapes and the grey suit and the shoes, all into separate burnbins. The sky was damp, grey, first day of autumn. He visited an old-fashioned supermarket, for groceries. As he reached his building the first big, slow, grey spots of rain began to fall, swirling in the wind.

He watched from his window. The rain quickened, flattened, came down in sheets. Glistening grey water stood on the pavements, the roadways. Water rustled thickly like leaves. The people, stick figures, hurriedly fled. Time-reversed swarm. Unswarm. A mist formed over the city. There was still dust in his throat. The apartment, the girl's apartment; they had been smoking something; smoke always put dust in his throat.

For a moment he could not recall whether he had blown the *a* he'd installed there. He hauled out his long-range receiving apparatus. All the lights were dead. He shook his head, opened a bottle, sick of the dust.

The rain swept, brushing endlessly against the window, prematurely darkening the grey day. First day of autumn. Already feeling like the last.

Half an hour after real darkness, the *v-a* beeped again. He knew before he answered, answered anyway. The bottle half empty.

"Capricorn," Falk said. The voice, cut by static, hurried, anxious. "Listen, don't hang up, you bastard." Drunk or scared or both. "Listen, something's up. Something you never told me. It's her. She's gone."

He waited, but there seemed to be no more. "Gone?" he said. The window in front of him, cold rectangle, blackness. The blind was broken, from a week ago.

"Yeah, gone. Gone, fucking gone. She left."

"She can't." Cold lovegun.

"She fucking did. You wanna know how? You wanna know how you cryptic high-priced goddamn rip-off fucking artist? Huh?"

He eyed the bottle. "How?"

"Somebody else. Another one of you, you bastard. Some other high-priced goddamn rip-off. Only obviously higher-priced than you. Better'n you anyhow. Some other bastard with one of those guns you use turned it on her, and now she's gone to his fucking client. Whoever the hell it is. Christ, you know what I was thinking?"

He picked up the bottle, lifted it, stopped, thought, put it down again.

"I was thinking that maybe it's *you*. Maybe you took a fancy to her when you used your gun on her for me. Is that it? You got the equipment. Isn't that it? You came back here and shot her for yourself, didn't you? You fucking bastard, if it is you I'll be over there faster'n you know how and you'll be in goddamn pieces. See the rain?" He heard it, pattering, slower now, settled, forever. "That'll be your blood."

"It isn't me," he said to Falk, slowly, flatly. His throat was clear. "Like you said, it's somebody else, higher priced than me."

"Am I supposed to believe that?" The little voice was angry.

"Yes. She isn't here. What would I want with her?" He had no energy for the argument, sensing it was empty, on both sides.

The cut. "Then get over to that other fella's place – who she was livin' with when you shot her. You remember? Get over there. She must be there. He musta hired some bastard. Get over there an' get her back and kill him."

"I can't kill him."

"Listen, I paid you for a service I expected to last longer'n one day. Do whatever you gotta to make it so that he don't take her again. You got me? Kill him, maim him, talk nice to him. Whatever. Or I'll kill you, you bastard."

Gone, leaving silence, framed by the rain. Rectangle of blackness. Cold of autumn night.

He put on a cloak, hat. Cold of lovegun, steel, pocket, deep pocket. In the other, nothing.

Uphill again. Sensing something behind him he had spidered the trail, drawing lines around the autumn night city. The hum of the traffic distant now, down in the valley, where wet lights blazed and people laughed, as if it were still summer. The rain had stopped, leaving a stationary mist. He heard laughter, as if he had an *a* to the whole bright light world, a bug on one side of life. The microphone in his mind, hidden behind a dusty painting, tacked to a wall in the past. Once, he had really shot people. In that game there were no problems: if you shot someone, they would not get up and walk away.

In this game –

Fatal to think.

Fatal?

What if I dreamed these last ten years? What if I still really shoot people? What if it's all just a psychotic fantasy? Love is my excuse. Burnt ashen love. As good as any.

The cut.

The window was dark. In fact he could not see it, could only see a square of blackness thicker than night where the side of the building towered, crooked. He stood beneath it. His face was wet, cold. His hands were cold, and he could not tell which of them held the gun.

Sodium in the basement, cars like sleeping beasts, chrome. Bright footsteps. Neon at the elevator. Meaningless graffiti shining on steel, or aluminium. A million places to hide. Nowhere to stay.

The night was too heavy, even in the bright lift, the thin carpeted corridors, where the graffiti continued, and there were stains, blood and vomit and love. He knew Falk was lying. Only one hired gun here. But he did not know why. He slowed, in the corridor, one turn from the door. He stopped, looked down at his feet. He drew the gun from the cloak, stared at it. It reflected fluorescence. Still cold. But somehow the building, the air, seemed colder. As if there had been a reversal. Autumn, night.

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He put the gun away again. Turned the corner. Wires still hung from the broken *v* panel. He buzzed, shifted sideways, out of the view. Cold hand, silence. Glaring light.

Footsteps, dulled and soft. Then a voice, hoarse: "Who is it?"

He said nothing.

"Who is it?"

Breathed out once, twice.

"Falk?"

He said, grunting, "Yeah."

"Christ." The buzz of the sliding magnetic bolt. He swung, kicked as the bolt cleared, expecting the door to hit something. It swung in, banged, swung back as he moved through.

The hallway was empty, dark.

He took out the gun. He saw a black rectangle where the hall ended. He was conscious of being framed in the light from the corridor. But he could hardly go back. He flattened himself against the wall, listened. Silence hung about him, like listless air. He moved forward slowly, ignoring the twitching in the nerves of his back. Comes a time when you've got to move away from the wall. Two shoulders to look over. Only one eye.

A cold barrel touched his temple, invisibly. He froze. Breath leaked from somewhere, like thin air into vacuum. "Drop the gun," a voice said. He dropped the gun. "Kick it forward." He kicked it forward, though he could not see it.

Slowly light from behind him, the corridor, began to collect in corners and along the edges of shapes in the room. He saw almost a table, legs of shadow. He saw half the sofa outlined. A shape there –

Click/light blinded him. Moments passed; his eyes burst in all colours. The cold barrel was gone; he heard or sensed footsteps, movement. The colours subsiding, he opened his eyes slowly. The man, her man of last night, stood pointing a small gun at him, from behind the sofa. She lay twisted on the sofa, fallen like a sack, her eyes open and blank, staring up at the ceiling above his head. One hand limp, fingers to the floor; the other clasped stiffly at her chest. She was dead, all dead, had been dead a while. Cold. In front of her, between him and the sofa, lay the lovegun. Still, flat, not reflecting. Cold.

"She don't love no-one any more," a voice to the side, in a dark doorway. "Hit man." Falk, moving out into the light. Small and fat and seedy and rich, a grimace of something tightening his face, perhaps a smile, perhaps fighting back tears, or laughter. His fat hands disappearing into the deep pockets of his expensive coat. His shoulders were damp, and his slick hair, as if he had been walking in the rain. His shoes shone in the stark electric light. The other man did not look at him. "Love man." Falk came close to him, a yard out of reach. "Use your shooter on her now, why don't you? She's still got a lotta love in her, ain't she? She ain't been dead that long." Without turning, his small eyes on Capricorn, the love man, "How long's she been dead, Handy?"

The other man, Handy or anyway someone going by that name, said, the gun not moving nor the eyes, "A while."

The entire building was silent. Falk probably owned it.

"Who killed her?" He set his eyes on the man with the gun, ignoring Falk.

"You killed her," Falk said, barked a laugh.

"You killed her," said the man with the gun, Handy, or anyway someone going by that name.

Finally he recognised him. The man whipped him again, the barrel of the gun cutting into his cheek. He jerked, held himself. The light burnt on, incessant, constant, too yellow, like something diseased. He blinked where blood ran down into his eyes (they had him half upside down, sprawled from a table. Past the man's legs he could see her, sprawled too, and her fingers, motionlessly touching and not touching the floor. Her eyes, staring, not staring.) More blood rushed in his ears, sounding like heavy rain on the windows. "I remember you," he said, mouth hurting as he spoke. "I remember you." Falk was behind him, laughing intermittently.

"That's good," the man said, who was not Handy at all. The gun came again, hitting and cutting and burning. But the fast pain was gone now, lost in a swamp of burning and aching and throbbing and warm blood. He was beginning not to feel it. Part of him was glad. But there was still dust in his throat. "That's good."

Once he had really shot people.

The man was named Wych. He remembered. (He remembered thinking, something like a night ago: the man doesn't recognise me. Whereas it had been the other way around.) A girl? Once he had been in a different game, one where guns spat steel and not love, though the wounds were much the same. He had been paid to kill Wych. Why? That was not a factor, in either game. He felt the dullness of another blow, to his neck, and for a moment could not breathe. A girl. "You," he said. His throat burned. "They wanted you –"

"Sure they wanted me." To stop him talking Wych aimed another punch, with the empty hand, at his throat. Feebly he jerked as it came down. For a moment red-tinged darkness, like light through eyelids on a sunny day, then a trickle of hot thin air, under his chest, like the wind on the desert. Wych was speaking again, spitting words. "They wanted me. They wanted me? Sure they wanted me!" Then the side of the gun, slippery already with his blood, across his cheek, crunching on his jaw.

They wanted Wych. He had killed *her*. A mistake.

She was my girl!" On *girl* Wych smashed the gun, barrel first, into his face; the room flooded with blackness.

She had been his girl too, once.

A mistake?

But we don't make mistakes.

There was quiet; he came to it as if breaking the surface of a midnight lake, softly, darkly. The cold of the water was the cold of his emptying, broken body.

"Don't kill him here."

"I'll kill him when I want to kill him."

"This is my building," Falk said, in a small voice. "I can't have him dead here. I have enemies. The bastards –"

"Don't make another enemy out of me, Falk. I'll kill him where I want." Wych sounded calm, thin, a long way off. Lost in thought, lost in memory, lost in anger. "If you're worried you can die with him. It's the same to me."

"We had a goddamn deal." Voice flattened, dulled, by fear.

They had turned the lights down, or his eyes had ceased to work properly. The darkness was behind everything. Waiting. His lungs ached, the only part

of him that he could feel at all.

"Everybody has deals. You had a deal with *him*. At least he thought so."

"Are you gonna kill everyone?"

Yes.

"Yes."

Why not.

"Why not?"

But it's not going to be how you think. Is it?" Question to him, hand dragging him by an arm, where feeling was beginning to come back, and with it pain. Wych lifted him up, held him so that he could see Wych's face, through a murk of blood and bruises. Wych's face moved from side to side, as did the dim room behind it, at a slower pace. "Don't you know what I'm going to do? Can't you guess?"

He felt something wet and warm on his lips. It bubbled and slid when he tried to speak.

"Sure you know."

He fell back, to the floor, hearing only the empty sound of hitting. Wych was above him, with another gun. A different gun. He saw it.

"I'm going to kill you with this. Like you did to me, remember? When you shot my girl."

"What're you doin' –?"

"He killed the girl I loved. I'm paying him back." A spit of laughter. "I'm going to make him love the girl I just killed."

He saw the barrel of the love gun. Felt its cold breath.

He saw a cold finger, moving the cold trigger, noted it was shaking.

You're too late," he croaked, from the floor, through the blood. "Too late."

Wych's face compressed, confusion.

"What do you think I did, after I shot –?" He meant the word 'her', but nothing more came then. He was empty.

Finger, shaking, lovegun, cold.

He had forgotten what it was like, this side of the gun. There was light, exploding slowly into a cone. The tuning, him to the dead girl, she to him. Blinking, he saw her lying gaunt and undignified, cold and bent across the sofa. Her body seemed like stone, a solid grey thing, immovable, as love hit him. Something, like the grip of a hand twisting his neck, like a bursting flood of slow oil inside him. He blinked again. He had forgotten.

Then Wych's face in front of him, filling his vision.

"Too late," he whispered from his raw, broken throat, across his cut lips.

Wych straightened away from him, realisation, empty-eyed.

A blackness came, sealing him in.

If he dreamt of her, Wych's girl, of a moment by her grave. December rain. By the wet iron railing, wrapped children were singing a carol. By the grave he with cold fingers turning the gun, feeling the cold seeping from the barrel, tuning it to her, though he had put her underground. Turning it on himself. His finger shaking. Unaware of the exact moment, a sudden burst of light and pain, sorrow and burning. Falling by her grave, wet earth in his face, voices of passers-by, receding. Love, burning cold.

First day of winter. Capricorn. If he dreamt of her, Wych's girl, his girl too, it was only because he always dreamt of her.

Then a distant sound of gunfire pecked at him, like the beak of a curious bird, a vulture in the hot thin wind. Nothing. It flew off, the dream and the past fleeing with it, making the sounds of a body falling to a cold floor. Everything was in the distance.

What'd he do? With that gun of yours?"

"Nothing." He dabbed carefully at his face, his eyes and cheeks and lips.

"But he said –"

He gestured at the girl.

"Her? The dead one?" Fingers cold to the floor, and eyes to the ceiling.

His shoulders rasped when he moved.

"So like he said – with that gun – you love this dead girl, now? Is that what he wanted? Was that supposed to hurt? I guess if you really –"

"It makes no difference," he said. Already love one dead girl. When he stood, the room swirled.

"It don't work?"

"It works." What's another?

>>>●●●

"– well I shot him. The guy got crazy. Right after you lit out like that. I saw his face. Like he just saw somethin' he wasn't gonna be able to handle. I seen guys like that before. They flip. They burst. Know a guy like that once, he ripped five other guys to pieces before they stopped him. So I shot this Wych fella. Okay? I shot him. Listen, love man, whatever you are, I shoot people when I want to shoot people, right? I mean I really shoot people. Maybe you don't know what it is to really shoot people. You and your weirdo gun there. But I'm the kind of man who –"

When he gingerly descended to the street, night had come again, and the rain fell about him slowly. He turned downhill. Pain spiked him as he walked. The night was too thick, with rain and mist and darkness, and he could see no lights in the valley. He heard no voices. As if they had all gone away. The roads were empty, the gutters ran with dark water, sodium glowed in isolated places. He staggered the trail out of habit. Falk was probably setting him up, for Wych, for the dead girl. He wondered if the city would hide him any longer. The lovegun was cold again, deep pocket, hand, glistening rain, skin, face, heart, eyes, grey, concrete, empty. Footsteps.

Winter coming. Capricorn days.

I'll move south.

What is there south?

Cities.

Nothing.

Lovegun.

In the morning, with one suitcase and a dishevelled plastic bag, he walked to the railway station. He was too early, an official told him, for the passenger train. He waited, watching freight hauling back and forth, mournful and slow, quiet and cold. The rain dispersed into a thin mist, which made his joints ache, as if he were an old man.

Something in one pocket, nothing in the other. ❑

Mark Haw lives in Ely, near Cambridge. He coyly reports that his days are spent estimating "minke whale abundance in the Antarctic south of 60°S", and his nights doing jigsaws. He is currently preparing to launch a fiction magazine called *H* – see page 7 for details.

# HOWARD BOLGER'S FABULOUS SPACE CAFÉ

## DAVID B. RILEY

The real estate agent turned off onto Route 7. "Don't get to these parts much. No one comes through this side of town since they opened the new interstate. You sure you want a business out here?"

"It's all I can afford."

He switched on his left turn signal and slowed to wait for the opposing traffic to clear. "Suit yourself." He pulled into the badly rutted parking lot and stopped in front of a small, rundown diner with the green and white *Available* sign in the window.

Howard looked around the small diner. There was a counter with four chairs, a small cooking area, a pantry, and a set of restrooms on the side of the building. There was also plenty of dust. "Perfect. I've always wanted my own restaurant."

"If you want it ... I'll get the lease out of my car."

In a few days the dust was gone. The stove worked. The water was hooked up for the restrooms. There was still peeling paint on the walls and a few roaches had evaded the *Black Flag* he'd been spraying everyplace. He put the *Open* sign in the window and turned on the grill. It was time for business.

At about two in the afternoon a pickup pulled into the lot. It had tools and pipes hanging from racks on its side. There was a sign for some plumbing company on the door. A man in greasy overalls sauntered out of the vehicle and entered. He plopped himself down on the stool nearest the door. "So you're the schmuck that took over this dump."

"Yep," Howard replied. "You want anything?"

"I'll try one of your cheeseburgers. And a Coke. You got Coke?"

Howard popped open a can and slid it down the red and white counter. It came to a stop right in front of the customer. "What the hell'd idea was it to come out here?"

"People need a place to go to. Sort of an event. Especially yuppies." He tossed a burger patty onto the grill and got out the package of buns. "Chips come with it or you can get fries if you want?"

"Chips. Yuppies ... out here?"

"The place needs a little work. Something to draw 'em out here."

"Like what?"

"Don't know yet. I'm waiting for inspiration." He turned over the patty. Splat, finally got that damn roach. He tossed it onto the bun and squeezed it under the lettuce. He checked to see if his customer was looking. He was gawking out the window at some dog in the parking lot. He took the patty off the heat and assembled the burger, tossed it onto a plate, and grabbed one of the small sample bags the potato chip salesman had left behind.

"Thanks." He took a bite of the burger. "Not bad."

Howard dragged the handmade wooden sign out into the parking lot. The paint was finally dry. "Ain't gonna help, man," greeted him when he came back in.

"It's just temporary, until I establish a motif."

"Motif? That some new kind of sign or somethin'?"

"Something like that."

"Only thing in these parts nowadays is illegal aliens and flying saucers." He downed the final bite.

"Flying saucers?"

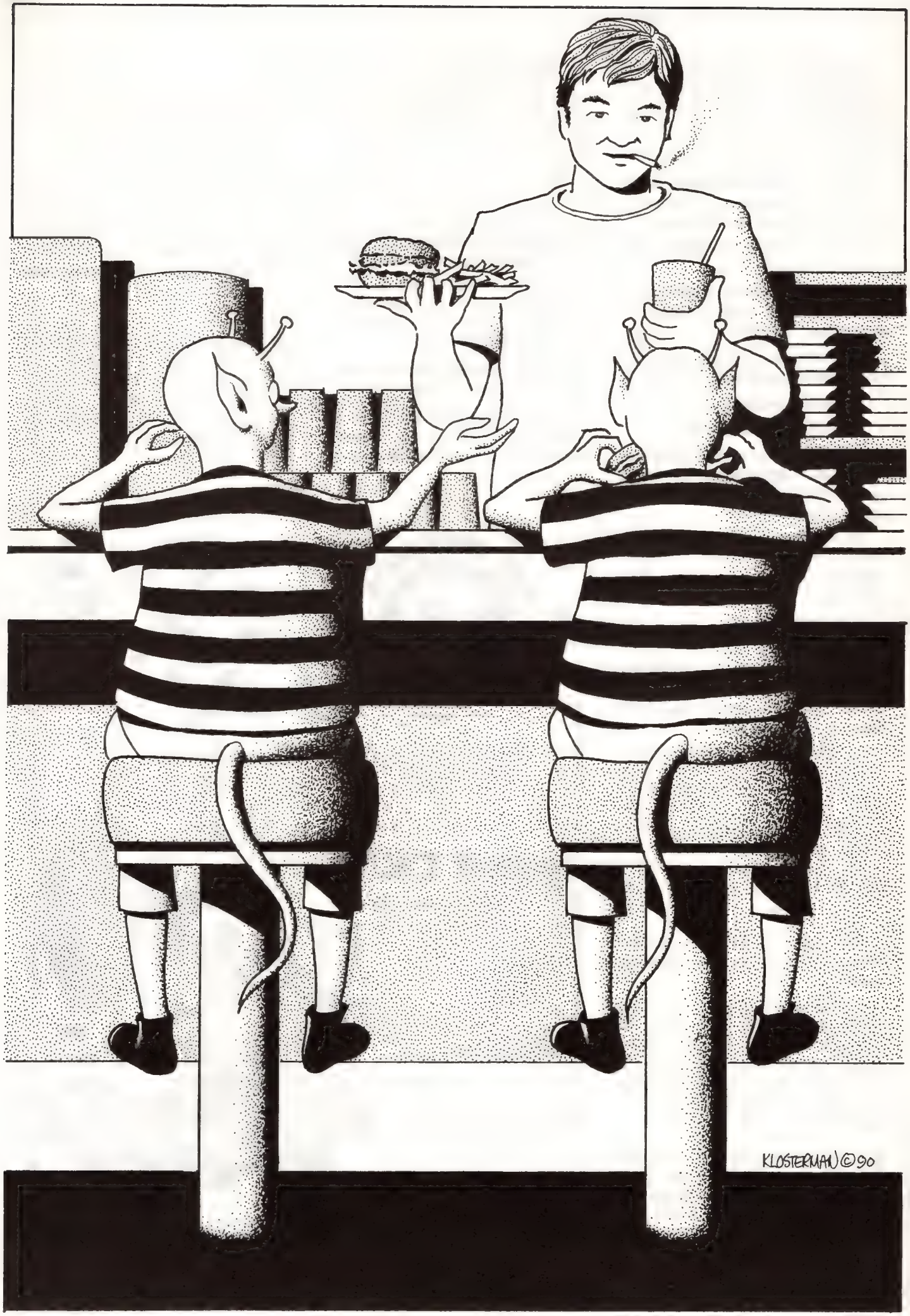
"This valley is the UFO capital of North America. You didn't know that?" He put a five dollar bill onto the counter. "It was in that inquiring thing my wife buys at the market."

Howard gave him a dollar change. "I don't believe in that stuff."

"Me neither." He went out into the lot and climbed into his pickup. Howard went back to looking for more roaches.

It was almost time to lock up when he noticed the lights in the distance. It had turned cloudy and the lights stood out clearly in the late afternoon sky. They came closer. It wasn't just lights, it was a silver flying saucer about the size of a small bus. It hovered for a moment, then landed right in the parking lot. Three little green men with antennae on their heads climbed out and waddled into the diner. "Woq et eÿopè?"

"Pardon?"


KLOSTERMAN ©90

The bigger of the three four-footers turned on a little machine it carried on its belt. "Are you affiliated with the galactic chain of *Howard's Diners*?"

"Yeah," he lied.

The aliens talked between themselves for a moment. "This place doesn't look like a *Howard's Diner*?"

"Haven't finished decorating. Just opened up today."

They talked amongst themselves some more. "Very well, we'll have three orders of *Jheluck*."

"Shipment didn't come in, you'll have to have something else, sorry."

"What do you suggest?"

"Cheeseburgers and a Coke."

They talked between themselves some more. "Very well." They climbed up onto the stools. "When do you expect to have *Jheluck*?"

"Hopefully tomorrow." He tossed three patties onto the grill. "It comes with chips or you can have fries. Fries are extra."

"We'll try the fries."

The aliens ate their burgers in silence, though Howard was getting some odd looks from the short one on the end. "More fries, cutie," it said after downing its second helping.

Howard started some more fries, then got out the big cleaver and started chopping onions. When the fries were ready, they were quickly devoured. Then the aliens started staring at him. He was getting a very uncomfortable feeling. "Are you sure that this is a *Howard's Diner*?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Because *Howard's Diners* always provide complimentary sex after every meal."

"I was just waiting to see if you wanted dessert." He went over to the pantry door. "Right this way folks." He didn't know if they were gentlemen or ladies or something else. He took a firm grip on the big cleaver and lead them into the pantry.

I'll bet it's boarded up," the real estate agent told his secretary. "That guy took off's my guess." He got into his car and headed for Route 7 to collect the rent on the rundown diner. He was astonished to find the parking lot full of cars and a line was stretching out of the tiny building. He had to park out on the street. The customers gave him a dirty look when he cut to the head of the line. "I'm not eating here, business only."

"Hey, guy," Howard greeted him.

The real estate agent couldn't believe the change in the little place. "Those chairs look like they came right out of a rocket ship or something."

"Glad you like 'em." Howard handed him a rent check and a sandwich. "It's my new alien burger. It's out of this world."

He bit into the sandwich. It was delicious. "What kind of meat is this?"

"It's my own secret blend." Howard dropped off an order to one of the local doctors sitting in one of the fancy space chairs.

"This lighting in here is so relaxing. Where are all the bulbs?"

"Ain't any, it's all indirect."

"How'd you get that flying saucer sign up onto the roof?"

"How does anyone get a flying saucer onto the roof? I flew it up there. I've got to get back to work. I'm hoping for a new shipment of meat tonight." ❑

David B. Riley lives in Arizona. His work has appeared in the US in *Virgin Meat, Figment, POETALK, The Blizzard Machine, 'SCAPES, Wide Open* and others. He has two poetry chapbooks in print.

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# TRUMAN CAPOTE'S TRILBY: THE FACTS

## Garry Kilworth

I have never been a great lover of hats. For one thing they tend to crush one's hair and leave it looking like sweaty straw. For another, individual hats are never thoroughly in fashion these days and wearers are considered faintly eccentric. Even in the city they draw the occasional amused smile or nudge, unless seen on the head of someone stepping out of a Rolls Royce. Of course, there are places where a hat is completely acceptable, such as at sporting events – Ascot, or the boat race – but for people like me, on a modest income, buying a hat for a single occasion is an extravagance. Finally, I think my head is the wrong shape for most hats. Its supports headgear which moulds itself to the skull, like a ski hat, but tends to reshape less obsequious millinery into something almost grotesque in outward appearance.

It was, therefore, with some surprise that I found myself staring at the trilby in the window of Donne's of Oxford Street.

Purchasing a trilby requires special nerve and should really only be undertaken by a person with a charisma impossible to influence, like Bogart or the Orson Welles of *The Third Man*. The trilby has a personality, an ego, all of its own. If the wearer is not strong enough to resist alteration, it is better to steer clear of such forceful dominant items, the demi-gods and despots of hatlands and the high country.

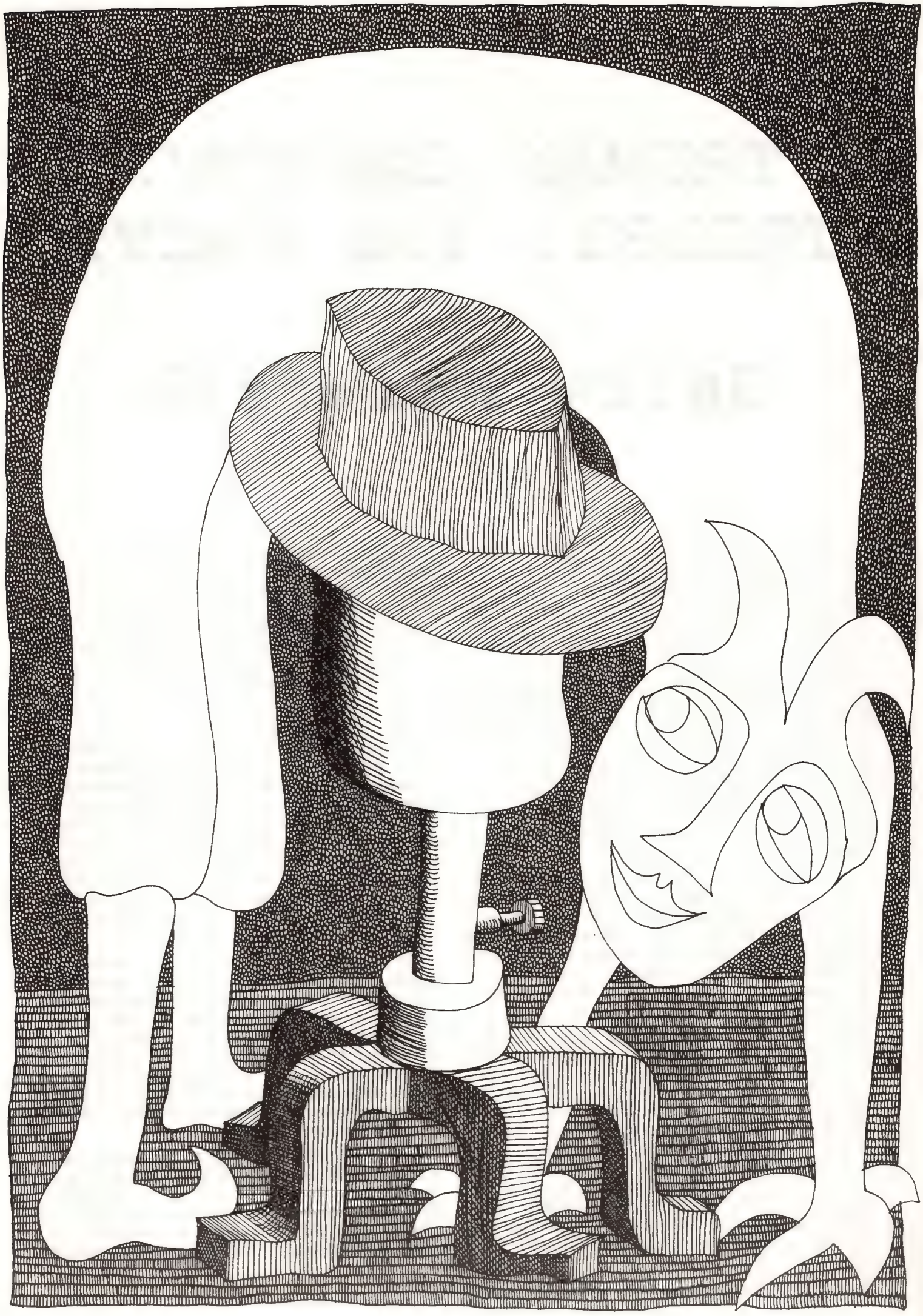
In any case, the trilby has a dubious history, which is difficult to deny. It flaunts an ancestry which most of us would prefer to keep locked in a cupboard with all the other skeletons: forefathers that witnessed – let's not mince words – *took part in* such infamous deeds as the St Valentine's Day Massacre, and later attended the funerals without so much as a droop of the brim. The Roaring Twenties and the trilby are inseparable. A gangster's hat. Phillip Marlowe gave it back some fictional respectability, but the taint remains. Of course, women too have worn the trilby, but since women tend to be promiscuous in the use of headwear we can assume that any honour regained from that quarter is open to question. In the forties, again, its reputation sank to a very dark level when the Gestapo adopted it (along with its constant companion, the trench coat) as part of their uniform, not to mention its sinister association with Papa Doc's Haitian secret police, the terrible *Tontons Macoute*. So, the trilby is not exactly a gentleman's hat, its motives are questionable to say the least, and it often ends its days perched on the back of an Australian head in some sweltering outback creek, keeping off the flies.

It is a hat given to swaggering gestures and sloping cuteness, famed for its slouch.

Consequently, when I saw this particular trilby in the shop window, and felt a strong urge to buy it, I tried to allow my intellect to govern my emotions. I was shocked by the strength of those emotions. They produced fantasies the kind I used to have in my youth. I saw myself travelling on the Paris metro, men staring at me in envy and women attempting to attract my attention. These pretty pictures used to preceed a lot of purchases as a young man. Apparently they were still powerful enough to rule my head, because I found myself in the shop, self-consciously trying on the trilby. I left the place wearing it.

The effect on the city's populace was not startling, but I felt rather good just the same. The hat seemed a natural part of me, and I wondered, even after those first few paces along the pavement, how I had ever managed without it. Confidence entered my bones: my step was light. I passed a group of Italians, sitting outside the Café Munchen drinking beer. One of them pointed with his chin, the way Latins do, and the others looked and nodded gravely. They approved. Italians are known to have good dress sense, so this increased my feeling of well-being.

Once on the tube, if the women did not exactly jostle each other for a better view of my new hat, they certainly gave it second glances. My self-consciousness evaporated almost completely. In the shop the sales assistant had placed the hat on my head in a conventional position. I now tipped it at a rakish angle, emphasising, I was sure, my angular jaw. The



world grew lighter.

Back at my two-roomed flat, I took the trilby and placed it where I could see it, on the dresser which also served as a desk. This piece of furniture stood exactly opposite the doorway between my kitchen-diner and the bedroom, and I made a meal then sat and studied the article from my position at the table. It was grey with a dark grey band. Not immediately exciting in its aspect, but there was a certain charm which gave me a possessive glow of satisfaction. This was *my* hat: no one else's. Also, there was an independence about this trilby which enhanced my feeling of ownership. This self-possessed hat had chosen *me.*

That evening I took the hat to see Harrison Ford's rugged-looking trilby in *Raiders of the Lost Ark.* We both admired the way it managed to remain on Ford's head, even during the most frantic stunts. Towards the end of the performance we were asked to leave because a woman sitting behind us could not see the screen, but by that time most of the best scenes were over.

The next morning I wore it to work. The journey was delightful, but on reaching the office in Theobald's Road, I arrived at the same time as Jason Rachman, one of the company's high-fliers.

"Nice lid," he said with a smirk, as we went through the double-doors together.

"It's a trilby," I said, "not a *lid.*"

He stopped, looking taken aback. I had never spoken to him as firmly as that before, and I think he was shocked at my assertiveness. He looked slightly confused for a moment, then said, "No, no – I'm serious. It suits you. I've often thought of buying a trilby myself – never had the nerve. Perhaps now that you've got one, I'll have a go. So long as you don't mind me copying ..."

I was feeling magnanimous.

"Not at all," and I gave him the address of the shop. No one has ever asked me such things before.

At first I placed the hat on my desk, within reach, but one of the managers passed by and told me to put it on the hat rack at the entrance to the office. I had no choice.

The following Saturday I made a terrible mistake. I don't know what made me do it. I suppose, after one has taken a tremendous new step, a giant stride, the temptation to go much further is very strong. I remember as a younger man I went on a youth hostel tour of the Scottish Highlands, and it was so successful I considered a trip to Tibet. Of course, the latter would have been a disaster. I'm not equipped, mentally or physically, for scaling the Himalayas, but the bug had got me and I felt that I could take on anything that mountain ranges had to offer. Fortunately finances prevented me from making a complete idiot of myself.

Not so on Saturday. On Saturday I went the whole hog. I bought a fresh band for the crown of my trilby, a Big White Hunter thing that screamed at people from fifty yards away. A leopardskin band. How crass. How *stupid!* How kitsch. Who did I think I was? Hemingway?

The hat hated it of course. I wore the band for one morning only and then replaced it with the old grey ribbon. The leopardskin attracted the wrong sort of attention and made me feel vulnerable once more. After that experience, I never tried changing the hat again, and accepted it for what it was.

We settled into certain behaviour patterns, the trilby and I. One thing I learned was that it needed to be treated with respect and care. It was not a hat to be skimmed, James Stewart style, across the room, aimed at a peg or chair. Such undignified methods of removal were not to its liking, and I had not the lean grace of Mr Stewart to enable me to bring the action off with the same aplomb. Also, contrary to Gene Kelly's doctrine, it did not improve for being danced through the streets in a downpour. Nor did it enjoy being crushed in a Cagney grip, or being battered into a shape reminiscent of Bogart's face. It was best placed, not tossed or jammed. It liked light, airy spaces, not dark corners. It enjoyed attention, but only for itself, not because of the angle at which it was worn, or how much of my brow showed beneath the brim.

We got on fine together, for several months. So well, in fact, that I began to take it for granted.

We made lots of new friends, who would call at the flat, or telephone to arrange an evening out: friends of both sexes. Although no really special relationship developed, these newcomers in my life became important to me.

There was Tag, a West Indian with a stylish beret; and Jake, a young Lancastrian who sported one of those colourful knitted caps. Then of course there was Beatrice, who always wore nice curled-brim bowlers: the kind of hat you often see on Cheltenham young ladies. Finally, there was Mona. Mona had seen *Annie Hall* six times and had consequently purchased a hat the twin of that cute, lopsided affair worn in the film by Diane Keaton.

Mona was my favourite. We once spent the night together and she put her Annie Hall hat under my trilby, so that they fitted snugly, one in the other.

"For company," she said.

Following in my footsteps, so to speak, Jason Rachman bought a trilby too, which he wore to the office, but I felt it was inferior to my own hat. It lacked refinement. Oh, it had a little panache and a certain sardonic humour, but its charm could not make up for its lack of sophistication, and it really was a rather shallow piece of headgear. Jason knew this, but he defended his trilby with a shrug and a smile, which was only right and proper.

As I said before, I began to take my trilby for granted, and that's when things started to go wrong between us.

Looking back on it, I suppose it was my fault. Things began to get pretty hectic at the office, especially after my promotion. I hardly had a minute to myself. My social life too, was a whirl of activity. Everything was done at a run, and, to my eternal shame, I forgot my trilby one evening, leaving it behind at the office.

The following morning I remembered it at about ten o'clock, but it was gone from its usual place on the rack. It eventually turned up behind someone's desk, dusty and covered in fluff. Anyway it was in a sorry state. I sent it to the cleaners and what with one thing and another was unable to retrieve it for two weeks.

Then I left it at home, several days running, simply for-

getting to wear it. Unforgivable, but there it is: you don't realise the importance of these things at the time. Finally, the last straw was when I took Jason's trilby in mistake for my own. The next day, when we exchanged, correcting the error, I could see the experience had clearly upset my trilby quite badly. Jason had gone downhill a little since he had been passed over on the promotion ladder and tended to frequent bars and dives until the early hours of the morning. There were small stains on the brim and crown of my trilby and it had lost its shape in some steamy atmosphere.

That same evening, as I stepped out of the tube station at Tottenham Court Road, the hat blew off my head, sailed along Charing Cross Road, and got taken by a side-draught down Denmark Street. I ran after it, past the music shops and a rather sinister looking bookshop, but it had disappeared from the scene. I stood there for a while, by the small church on the corner, searching crannies and railings, but my hat had gone.

At first I tried to shrug it off. After all, it was only a hat, and there were plenty more of those to be had. Not that I actually *wanted* another hat (I told myself) since I seemed to have outgrown the need. I was more mature, more self-assured, and no longer concerned by the world and its ways. There were plenty of friends to visit and go out with, to the cinema or theatre. In fact a hat was rather an encumbrance. One had to find places to put it, or carry it in one's hand. Being without it was a kind of freedom. It had done me a favour, blowing away like that. I was free to go where I wished, with whom I wished, whether they were bare headed or not. Liberty is a heady tranquilizer, after a loss.

Unfortunately, my new friends did not turn out to be the kind of people I had previously thought. There were excuses and evasions, and they fell away from me with mumbled apologies. Even Mona. She told me one evening that we had better not see one another again, since she did not (after all) feel we were suited.

"It was fun," she said, "but our worlds are too far apart."

I think she felt embarrassed, walking along The Strand with a hatless man, because she remained a good two feet away and kept glancing down at the pavement, as if afraid of being recognised by someone she knew. She refused the offer to take her for a drink, saying she was on the wagon, and later that week I saw her in the company of a flat-capped fellow with a Plebeian brow. She cut me dead, in the street.

Anyway, all of my so-called new friends went the same way: towards the exit. I can't say it didn't upset me, because it did. I was terribly depressed. It was all so unfair.

There were problems at work, too. Some Japanese businessmen visited the firm and they were left in my hands. I was so distracted by the decline of my social life however, I unwittingly neglected them and the result was a reprimand from one of our directors.

"And do something about your appearance," said my boss afterwards. "You seem to have gone to seed lately. This company depends upon smart executives to give it a good image. A haircut would make a difference ..."

After a week of sleepless nights, I reluctantly went looking for my lost trilby. I suppose I had hoped that it would turn up on its own, without effort on my part. Although I hadn't marked the leather headband, I had written my name and address on a piece of paper and tucked it inside. I scoured the found ads and rang various lost property offices, without success. Finally, I took to wandering the streets after work, searching the alleys. Once, I snatched the headgear off an old tramp, thinking it was my trilby, but I had made a mistake and had to apologise while the old fellow remonstrated with me, using the most obnoxious language. It took five pounds to get rid of him.

There was a period when I saw the trilby everywhere: on the tube, outside a cinema, going to work. But always, on closer inspection, it turned out to be a stranger which just happened to resemble my trilby superficially. Having once made an error in recognition, I was most careful not to handle these look-alikes, but the wearers often resented my staring, even from a distance, hurrying away into the crowd, or turning to glare at me.

Shortly after this period I lost my job through non-attendance at work. I didn't care any more. I began to hit the bottle.

Miserably, as the weeks went by, I toured the London streets, extending my area of search, and growing more despondent, and, yes, more resentful towards my erstwhile headwear. There were several million hats in London. What chance did I stand of finding one particular hat? The weeks crept into months, and gradually my frustration turned to anger, my anger to hatred. I convinced myself that my trilby was deliberately avoiding me. There were still times when I got morose and maudlin – when I missed it dreadfully – but many hours were spent over a glass bitterly regretting wasted dreams and shattered hopes. It seemed so silly – one breeze, one single breeze, and we had parted forever. My hatred bred a rage within me which was beyond my control. I told myself I would not be responsible for my actions, should I ever lay hands on that hat again. I bought myself another, a Sherlock Holmes deerstalker, and though we were not entirely compatible we were tolerant with one another, hoping to grow closer together as the relationship matured.

One day in October, when I was least expecting an encounter, I finally saw my old trilby plastered against a fence by the wind. I knew it instantly, though it had aged dramatically since I had last seen it. I went to it, picked it up, dusted it off – and rammed it into the nearest waste bin amongst some discarded Coke cans and cigarette packets! Remembering I had the trilby's replacement on my head I tipped my new deerstalker contemptuously at my ex, and hoped the humiliation was complete. I went home, determined to forget our association.

Six nights later the police came to my flat.

They questioned me concerning my whereabouts on an evening two nights previously. Eventually, they took me away, and in the presence of a lawyer, charged me with the murder of a woman whose corpse had been found near the Thames, close to Waterloo Bridge. A trilby – my hat, with name and address still inside the band – had been found pinned beneath her body. They later produced this item of clothing in court. Since it was associated with me it had gained the same sort of notoriety and attention from the gutter press as myself. However, it was its role as principal witness for the prosecution that seemed to suit it best. Like

I said earlier, the trilby has a bad track record: you can't trust a trilby. When the prosecuting counsel pushed it in front of me, his accusations tying me in knots, it didn't help my case any when I threw lighter fuel on the brim and tried to set light to it.

However, at the last hour my own counsel called a witness to the stand who had seen the woman earlier the same evening that she died, and he stated that she 'had the face of a suicide'. (This remark was subsequently stricken from the record, but not from the minds of the jury). Coupled with this was a statement from a medical consultant who had independently examined the body. In his professional opinion the police doctor was mistaken. He himself was convinced that the dead woman could have sustained such injuries as a result of a fall, say from a bridge parapet onto concrete.

Despite the controversy which raged in the press, I was acquitted and walked from the courts 'a sadder but wiser man', though not without a stain on my character. There were those who were still convinced of my guilt, not least among them the police.

I never saw my hat again. The last I heard, it went on the stage. Someone had written a play around my court case, and the exhibit used in the actual court room where the trial took place was considered the main crowd puller at the theatre. My ex was a box office success, right from the opening night.

Since then a certain tabloid has fostered the tale that the hat was privately purchased by Truman Capote, shortly before his death: that it attended wild New York parties and was passed around superstars and celebrities. This is an extravagant claim, to which I give little credence. To my knowledge Mr Capote preferred a more flamboyant form of headwear, such as a panama – certainly not second-hand grey trilbies, no matter how colourful their histories. Nevertheless, to most people my hat has become 'Truman Capote's trilby', for which unlikely title I should be grateful. My connection with the item has almost been forgotten: overshadowed by the charismatic influence of the famous author's name.

Good luck to it. I know one thing. I shall never trust a trilby again, as long as I live. They're not worth it. They use you up and then they blow away. And when they've had enough of the street life, they have the audacity to expect to be taken back again, no questions asked. They want the magic to last forever, and as everyone knows, things don't work out like that. Magical relationships grow into ordinary lives, sooner or later. ❑

Garry Kilworth was born in York in 1941, and spent many of his formative years in Saudi Arabia. Well-known for his writing across the spectrum, his last fantasy novel *Hunter's Moon* reached the best-seller lists, whilst *In The Hollow The Deep-Sea Wave*, runner-up in the 1989 Angel Award, is currently being filmed for Channel Four. "Truman Capote's Trilby: The Facts" one of a collection of SF and fantasy stories to be published by Unwin Hyman at the end of the year under the title of *In The Country Of Tattooed Men*.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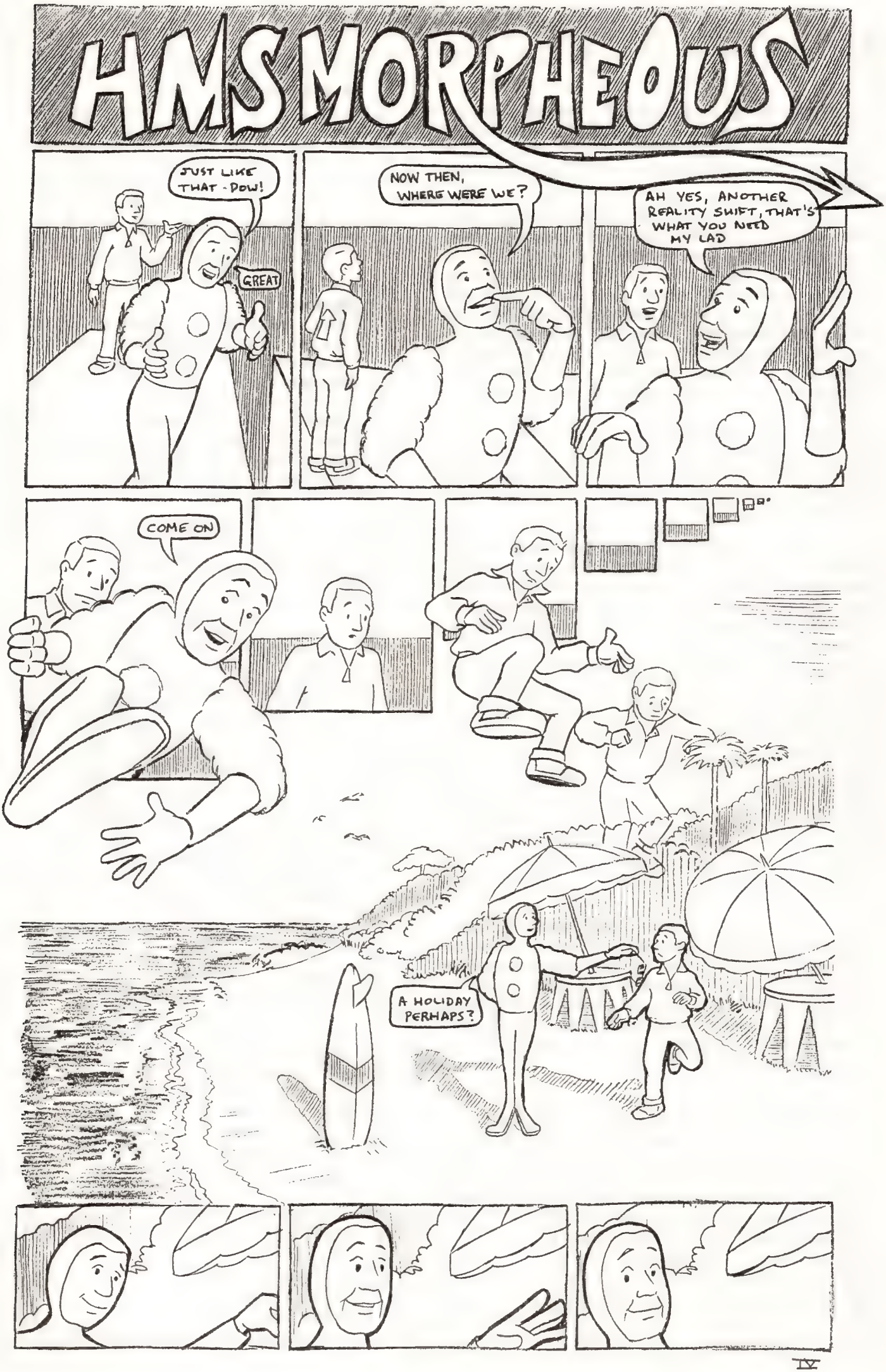
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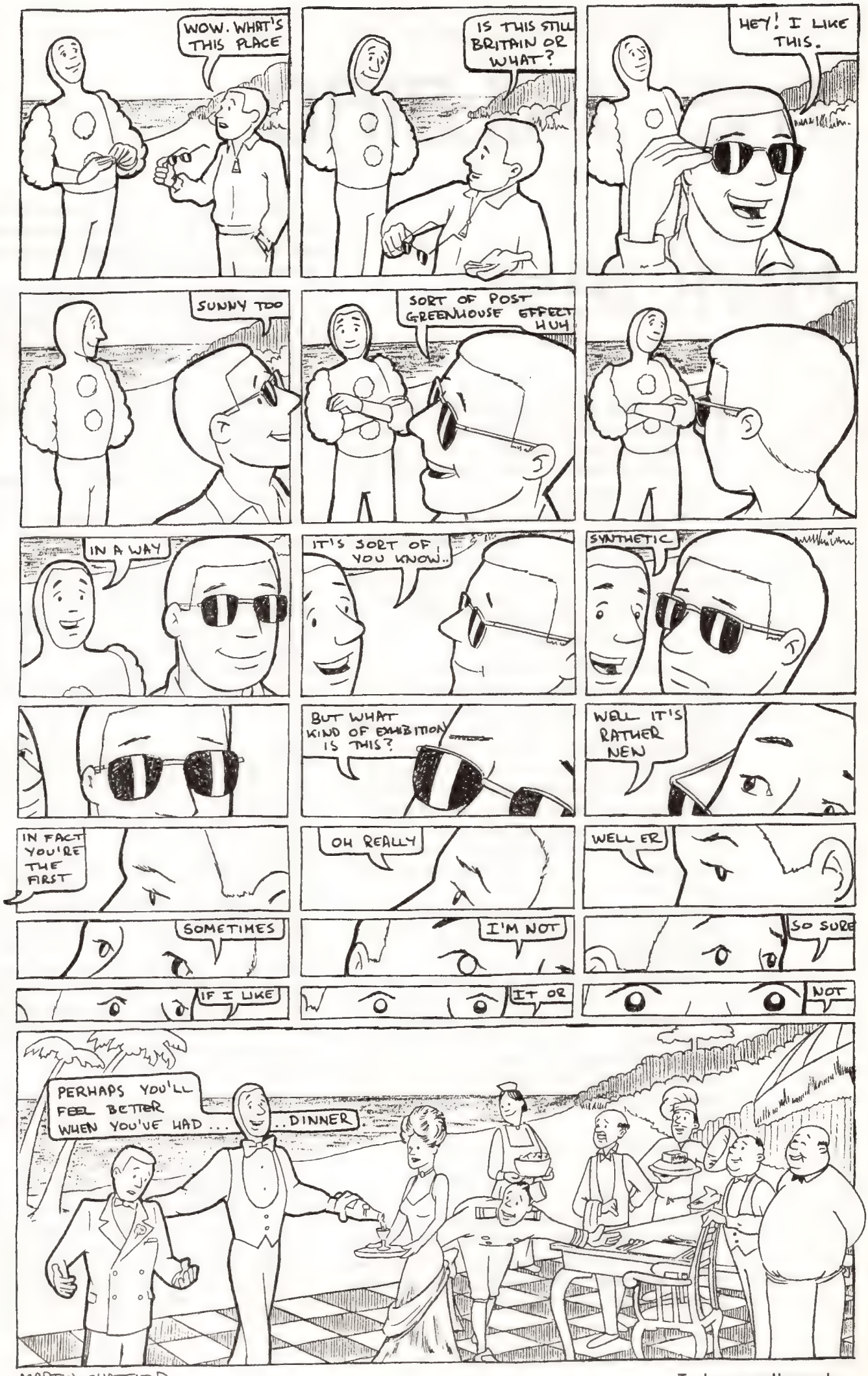



MARTIN CHATFIELD

To be continued ...

# THE JAILBIRD

## Mark Iles

David Rodale cursed as he stared out of the porthole, at the vista of stars beyond. The other prisoners tried to jostle him aside, each one eager for a glimpse of the heavens on their one daily walkabout.

"Four Three Alpha Nine, move on!" came the curt command over the loudspeakers.

David cursed again but complied. Three years he'd been here now, and he'd learnt to obey such orders. Three long years. Unlike most of his fellow inmates David readily admitted his guilt. He had killed his father and wasn't at all sorry about it, for he believed it had been a just execution.

All his life David had wanted to join the exploration corps, to travel the stars and set foot upon other worlds. His father had put paid to these dreams with a firm *no*! Papa had refused to sign the papers that David had so repeatedly brought home, or even to back him financially when he was old enough to go it alone, although he could so easily have afforded it. Instead he'd been dragged into the family business, despite his angry protests and bitter words. At the age of thirty David had written to the academy out of sheer desperation, only to be told that he was now too old. It was all his father's fault.

"If God had wanted you to be an astronaut son, you'd have been born in a space suit," came the whispering memory of his father's words.

He finally snapped when his father had returned home drunk one night, to find David sitting on the porch gazing up at the stars. How his father had taunted him and laughed at him, until all the years of bitterness exploded into a sudden blinding rage. He didn't even remember hitting the old man, only standing above his body, fists clenched and shaking like a leaf.

A loud chime shattered his thoughts.

"Prisoners return to your cells. The doors will be sealed in precisely five minutes."

David hurried down the blinding white corridors towards his room, thrusting his way past his fellow inmates. Why the heck had he strayed so god-damned far? He didn't dare be late, for those caught outside the sealed doors died horribly.

It was a beautifully efficient system. Seconds after the doors closed the corridors were sucked clean of air and then opened to the galaxies. Literally. Quite a deterrent for the rebellious.

Those unsightly prisons of Earth and the threat of escaped villains were long gone. Offenders were now herded aboard special shuttles and ferried out to the huge prison ships that barely slowed in their never-ending journeys; flitting between the stars but never calling in at any. There was no chance of escape or of overpowering the crews, for the prison sections were completely sealed off from the rest of the ship. Riots were dealt with by immediate venting.

David only just made it into his cell. Seconds later as he sat panting on his bunk the door slammed shut and vacuum haunted the corridors. He was alone again.

There was no clock on the wall to tell the passing hours, no pictures at which to stare. There was only a bed and an easy chair, next to a desk bearing a VDU and associated console. The VDU was his only entertainment. Through it he could watch films, read books or magazines, or play endless games of chess against the ship's computers. Eventually the lights went out, signifying the end of another day.

Morning arrived as always, with the lights flashing on and the usual chime, the cell door opening automatically. Naked he joined the long line of other inmates heading towards the showers; male and female side by side, their sexual desires dulled by drugs. Once clean he selected a uniform grey coverall and white pumps from the dispensers, then plodded on towards the dining hall. Breakfast was the usual tasteless muck, buried beneath the translucent cover of a plastic tray that was spat into his hands through one of the many feeder units lining the walls.

David found a space amidst the multitude of tables and sat down on the bench, surreptitiously watching the others eat their meals. Speech was forbidden, and there was only one punishment. He sighed loudly, almost rebelliously; that was the worst thing about it, the absolute boredom of it all.

"Attention! The following prisoners report to cell block Delta immediately. Seven Four Delta Two, Four Three Alpha Nine ..."

David started. That couldn't be him! He hadn't done anything wrong and he still had another nine of his twelve-year stretch to go. Anxious not to offend the unseen but ever watchful wardens he hurried on his way. In Delta block he found himself in a huge room with a group of at least a hundred other people. With a loud *ping* the door shut behind them all, and for a second or two there was absolute silence.

"Prisoners! It is hereby brought to your notice that following a change of government on Earth a new code of punishment for offenders has been determined. Class One prisoners will now be executed; Class Twos such as yourselves are to have their remaining sentences waived, although you will not be returned to your home worlds."

There were immediate fearful whisperings amidst the prisoners, which faded out as soon as they'd begun. Hidden in the multitude someone mumbled something.

"Silence! You will *not* speak! It has long been recognised that offenders such as you are not fit to walk the civilised planets, and it has therefore been decided to drop you onto worlds only recently discovered by the exploration units. You will be landed by individual pods onto New Australia, where it is hoped that the rigours you'll face will turn you back into decent human beings.

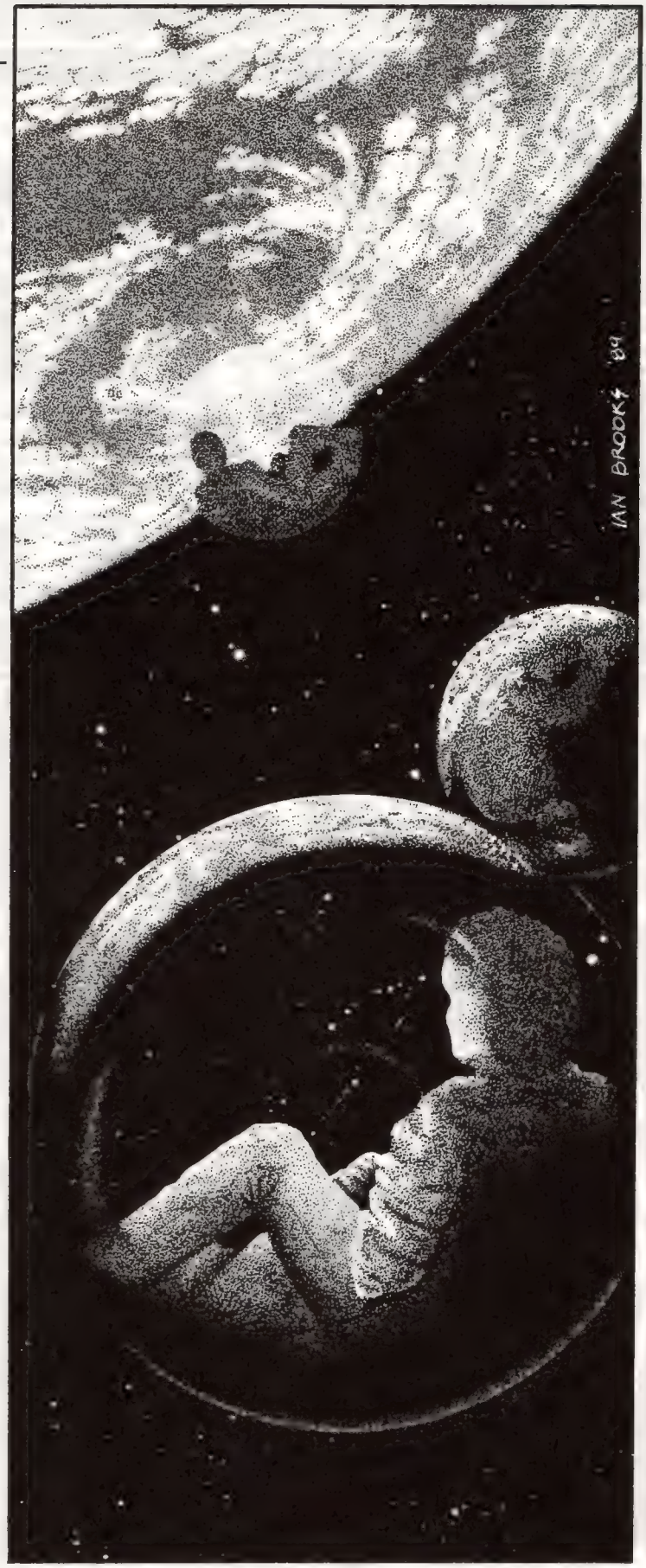
"You are amongst a group of five hundred carefully selected individuals, the ideal number for a colony. Any equipment that you might possibly need has already been dropped."

David was rooted to the spot, jaw gaping wide in astonishment. Then a surge of savage joy swept through him, and he felt like cheering and laughing aloud. A long series of small hidden doors swung open, each one containing a transparent sphere with barely enough room for one person.

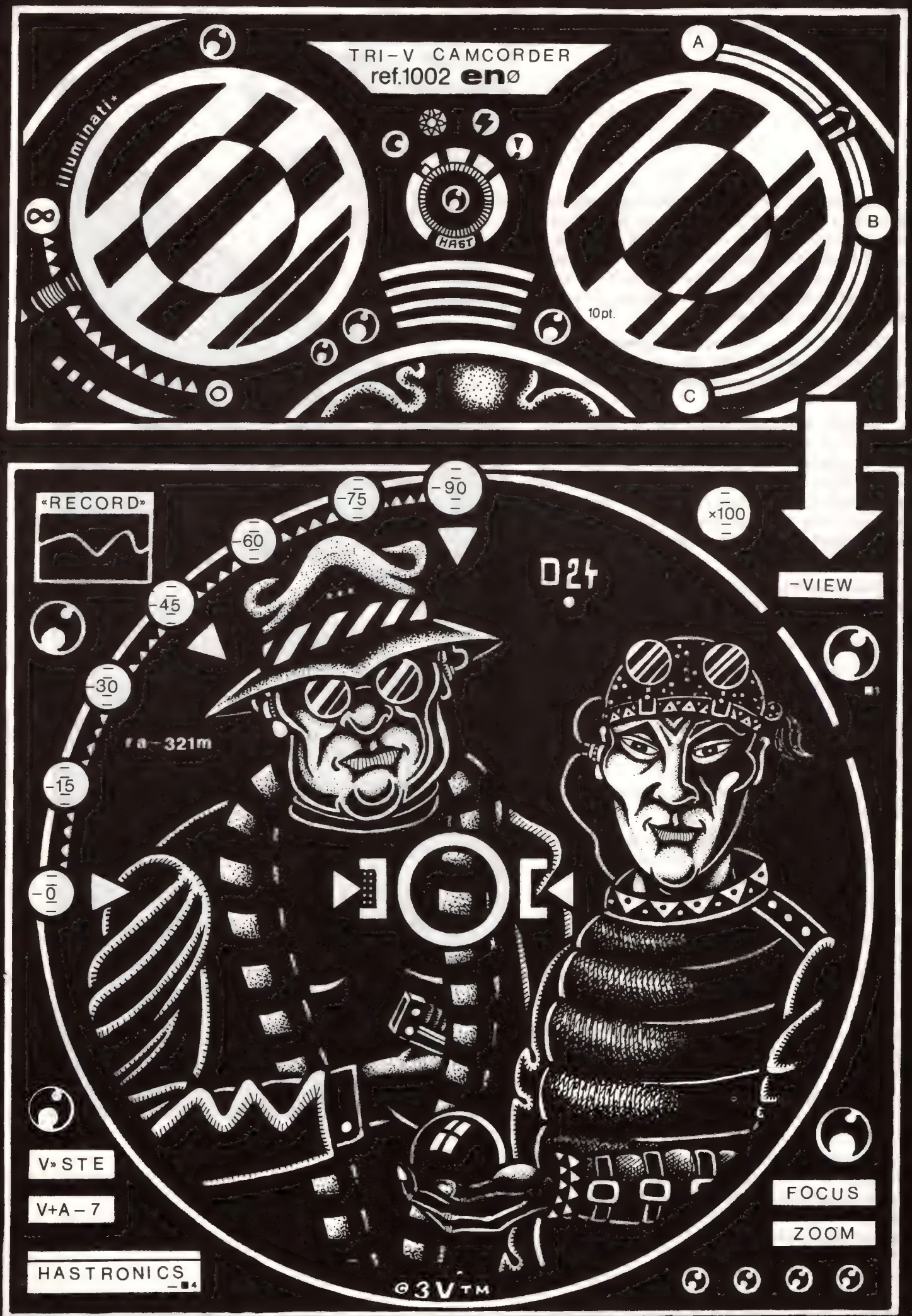
"You will now enter the pods. Door seal will take place in four minutes."

As David strode disbelievingly into the nearest cell the door slammed shut behind him. For a few minutes he stood staring at the sphere, sensing the main room vent behind him. Then he climbed inside the pod and sat down, watching as the craft's little entrance sealed up like a wound, until it vanished altogether. Suddenly the walls of the room disappeared and he was floating in space, swerving and dropping towards the blue, cloud speckled planet far below. He could see other prison ships above him, each belching clouds of bubbles, seeding New Australia with humanity. David began to laugh, and as he did so he caught a last fading whisper from the ship:

"... and may God have mercy upon your souls." ❑




This story sees a welcome return for Mark Iles, who last appeared in **BBR** in issue #11. Born in Slough in 1957, he is a Third Degree black belt instructor in the Korean martial art of Taekwondo, and has written in this field for several magazines. His fiction has appeared widely in the small press, including *Auguries*, *Dream* and *New Moon*.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# CRIME WATCHER

## DAVID HAST

Workday done, I'm lie on the floor is what I do. Hiphop in my ears, the world on downtime. Got the lights dim, only the violet light and my old man's star constellations stuck on the ceiling all in the wrong order, like from another galaxy, the way I like it. When *BOOM!* And I mean it's gotta be big to push through the hiphop. I'm jump up, drop the earphones and I see across the building maybe five six guys, white guys kinda big and a little black guy and a Chinese-lookin' guy, they go over Lester's crib like fuckin' ants. They everywhere. I grab my stereocam. Dust roll up into the lights from the floor where the door's flat; they blast it, you don't gotta be no idiot to see. That was the boom.

Lights flick on above and below Lester's. Sirens on the street, but they could be for anything. Punch up the narcoscanner, put the phones back up to one ear to hear it and scancam across the way there to Lester's. Like fuckin' ants only they hurl the shit around and mess it up, and they ain't took shit. The narcoscanner got shit. No calls – hard to believe with like Hiroshima happen and gotta be thousand people hear it in these little anthouse cribs. No surprise no one call it though. No one ever do. We got enough heat just live outside the Network most of us. What I could do with a goddam Network Link turn your ass on your head. But another story that.

I move right up to my window now, stay low, raise the stereocam. One ant access Lester's pewter while the rest rip shit up knock shit over. No burglars, that's sure. They gone with the pewter and that killer DAT-4 sound system in ten seconds if they come for that. Maybe ten seconds more they go for the jewels and such. But you gotta be some kinda mongo conclude that. I mean, they rip the guts out the DAT-4. The guy on the pewter stand up disgusted, try one or two more codes and throw the thing into the wall, then kick it when it down. They either nuts or they want something very bad. Maybe Lester walk in on them and I get a real show.

Now that Chinese come out from a back room and he waving everyone and he holding a ball or a weight or something. Look like a black pool ball. He scan it with some hi-tek shit and shit if it don't open like that, snap, it just split in half on a hinge thing. He take something out with like a pincer or I don't know, he not touching it I can see that much, he got gloves. It look like a crystal – diamond or quartz maybe. They all stand around and smile.

Maybe I move and they pick up light off the stereocam, I don't know. Maybe they got hot-shit detectors scanners all wired in and now they slow down and make their mark, they take the time to listen and I'm gigged up. I can't say. Whatever it is, *BAM*, like that, sudden the Chinese guy flip a big beam on me and I'm froze, an idiot, they all see me. Last thing I see two move like cowboy big time and the whole outside wall my crypt fall out and me with it 80 stories and I know I'm dead. Unless I hit *UGH* I do hit the terrace two down. I can't breath for shit, anything maybe everything broke, and they probably kill me twice just to be sure.

A big white wash over me, blind, and now it's over sure, only the voice is high and I feel a warm breath near my face,

then the white disappear like a dot on a screen to black and boom.

Hey, vecino, come on! C'mon, man, get up!" This guy slap my face, splash water too. I see red even my eyes close, so keep 'em close.

"I told you lay off, Jorge. He maybe busted up inside." That same high woman voice. I remember now. I turn slow and open one eye, just squint. Don't want them see me wake and make me walk.

"We gotta move him," Jorge say. He big, a big guy. Big head lots of black curly top and down the neck. All dressed in black. Woman small, got on a gray jumpsuit like building engineer and black and white canvas shoes. She got black hair too, only wavy not curly.

"They see you and we both dead, we all dead," Jorge go on, kinda loud whisper. "You want the family end up like we still in Scumtown? Here we play it safe."

"You want safe you damn gotta *play* alright, cause you know there no safe about it," she come back at him. "We just scutworkers and you damn know it."

Jorge sit down, disgusted. Maybe she make him sense up. Latistos never argue with a sensible politic – they know the score is politic.

"What to do when they come in here and bust it up?" Jorge grumble. "Then what – they take him and take us too. He probably die anyway. Just throw him into the hallway and forget it."

She no stupid though. "Maybe they don't look at all. You know who they are? Maybe they run out. If they look, they look for motion. They doing it now maybe. They scan motion body fall out crib you think you escape? Then they for real get him and us, like you say. You hold it still and they go on maybe. We keep talk and whisper like this and for what we know they scan us right now and we murder us with own voices. That enough to shut you up?"

She walk over now and put hand on my face. A cool hand, she wipe off the sweat. I open both eyes now and it hurt right behind, dull like, but not so bad as I expect. She got green eyes, friendly, under black Latista eyebrows.

"You got some name?" I hear me say, kinda far off.

"Yeah," she say, that voice more sweet again, not loud like to Jorge. "Yeah, I got one. You?"

I laugh and cough. Ribs, maybe crack. "I ask you first." Cough again.

She laugh. "True, you the guest, even though you drop by unexpected. Gloria Maria. An oldie name. You just call me Ria though."

"Ria?" She nod, me still groan like stupid baby. Maybe I groan less if Jorge stand there, maybe now I get too comfortable, but I thankful for the kindness from her. I know my troubles might be tend to grow – they already touch these people.

"Call me Leen."

"What you got to do with Franklin, Leen?" she ask. "You his frontman? Maybe moleman to the bulldogs?"

"Franklin?" I ask. "Don't know no."

Jorge step up. Got third degree in the eyes. "The fucker bulldogs gonna nuke you like this you don't cross them? Don't shit us, Leen."

He kinda spit my name out, grab my arm and yank me sit up – feel like I fall another two floors. I'm chuck up all on the floor now and these two Latistos start up the argue again. Then Ria start in on me, they must figure she got the touch over knuckle-boy Jorge, but I got nothing to hold out. I as much for the answers – probably more. Not *them* nuked out their crypt! Only I'm not tracking – who the hell this Franklin?

"We see it all," Ria say. "Out on the terrace, sippin', watch the sky and kick back easy when blast shakes the whole place. From up and over, maybe Franklin's place, maybe the next crib up. Couple ticks later fire come crashing through Franklin's window and take you out. You practically flatten Jorge!"

She laugh, Jorge swear, she lean my ear and whisper, "He practically piss his pants why he really mad at you. Don't take it personal."

Then back loud for me and Jorge too. "Coupla bulldogs look out over hole in Franklin's crib, laugh, kick some shit down after you. What they think you, anyway. We hide you back behind terrace wall, we see them but they look down to street." She move closer to my face. "They nuke you just for grins, that your story? Here in the plex, draw that kind of attention? Not hardly. You gotta be in it some way."

I start to make some idea of all this, only Jorge hold a bulletgun now, open it and close it and check the bullets, so I talk fast.

"That his name, 'Franklin'? Don't know him, just watch him. Call him Lester, cause the kids. Always got little kids up there, pat 'em on heads, give' em money. Figure him for some kiddie molester. So call him Lester, see?"

Jorge mad, stick the bulletgun my face. "What a crapline! You the bulldogs blast you out your crib for seeing that? You in it up to *here*." He jab up my nose with the muzzle. I push it away, mad.

"I been my crypt not two months. See Lester, Franklin, whatever, five maybe six times. Don't know shit. I obviously not the only one." I glower Jorge's face, that show the fucker. I cough, spit blood on floor. Great news.

"Lie back now, Leen. Rest against this wall." Ria put a blanket back me. "Chill, Jorge, he tell us what he know. Do us no good to crack his head."

Jorge sit down across the room on wood chair, straddle it, keep spin gun barrel. Don't scare me now though.

"I tell you, Leen," Ria say. "Right after you get it, you out, Franklin and his hitmen come flyin' in and shoot it out with bulldogs. Don't know much who win or no, only coupla three more bodies fall out that hole before it end and no one come here by now we gotta figure they all dead or they gone. Still I don't see why they so uptight on you if you so damn ignorant."

"Because I *see* them! I watch them through stereocam – record it all. They must scan me down the signal 'cause they go right for me." The cam! I think. "The cam! It must fall with me – or still up in crypt. It fall? You got it? All of it there to see, they rip up his place and find some kinda ball, some crystal thing or what inside it, I got it all!"

Jorge pop up again, Ria lean in real close. This ball crystal got their interest, I see that now. Now I got their attention I feel lot better. Stand up in fact. Walk across room. See kid spy in from bedroom. I see that kid before once.

"That kid," I say to Ria. "Hey, kid, you," I say to kid. "You, kid."

Kid walks in. Real straight, black hair, like most the kids around here, only real tall and skinny. That how I know her. She look older through the stereocam over at Lester's. I see now she ten, maybe twelve, kinda shy. I look at Jorge and Ria now

like what the scam, you the ones know the story now you tell me. They see my thinking, but they clam.

"You know Franklin?" I ask the kid. She only look at Ria and Ria tell her go to bed. Then Jorge remember, first smart thing I see from him.

"The cam." He run back out to terrace and we hear him tossing rubble. I look at Ria.

"Franklin pay the kids, sell drugs maybe, maybe information, hardware, organics, any cargo he can peddle," Ria tells it. "This time he get something too big I think, send all the kids away, play it himself with his hitmen. We decide to –"

Jorge kinda lurch through door from balcony, whole side of face like a big melting blister and gurgling from the throat – no, deeper, like the chest, one arm out straight hold my cam. Ria beat flames off his body and I grab the cam, peel it out his grip as he slide to floor like bag of blood, dead. I hold cam up and see it replaying. Jorge start it, must be, and they scan him out fast. Ria run out to terrace, fool, blast takes out whole terrace throws her back in hard. Crib on fire now.

Ria pick up Jorge's bulletgun and the kid goin' "Mama, Mama!" – not afraid but like come, now. She pull on Ria, I follow, out the crib into hallway. No one out there so we push for elevator. Nobody open their door. Nobody wanna see who got blast, too scared. Elevator open and Ria, me and the tall girl go up to tramport on 95. Me and Ria grab tram, skinny girl go back inside building. She okay she say. Watch crib. Ria give her bulletgun. These kids know how to play it here, this I know.

As the tram slide zip-line into the city we look back. Little fires jump out the building. Hard to tell, but look like Ria's place. Two up, big scar in building – my place. Big scars all over, though, so truth, hard to tell. We know one thing for sure – can't go back there now. Maybe never. Three four fire copters hover up, spraying bursts. Six or seven fires going, not just me and Lester's crypts. Busy night. We gotta get scarce.

"Sit down, I do your chart," Papa say, and Mama put the finger to lip so I say nothing. I even say,

"Good idea."

Papa got this crazy star system for everything. Don't tie his shoe or grease his bread without do it on the proper alignment or however. I try and explain to him how this system too simple for the world now. How everything got two three ways to go. I on purpose mix up glow-in-the-dark stars he stick on my ceiling. "See," I say. "You can look at a thing from a hundred places in a hundred ways." This thinking upset him. His mystic too logical for it.

Me and Ria watch the replay patch into the big screen.

"Mama, you better maybe look at this," I say. Mama once work in hard-processor security clearing-house, big one. Make sure nothing get out except where it supposed to. So she seen lot of restricted pieces. Sometimes Authority float assembled components through the line, operational, real tempting. Mama say nothing ever get smuggle out, though – no one that stupid. At least she never hear of it.

"Leo rise for you," Papa announce. "Just start today."

Mama sit down at monitor to look at replay crystal thing come out eightball thing.

"You remember I tell you before," Papa say, "Leo very special to you. Leo first three letters your name, and my sign, and your Mama sign. It bring you strongest good, strongest evil. This I know."

We frame-by-frame it on poolball. Where Chinese guy flip it we enhance on crystal. Hard to see, he handle it with pincers, hand in way, but blue, multi-facet, real complex, we see that much. Enough for Mama.

"No question about it," she whisper. "A Network drive – look universal. Who the hell these men, Leonard? Why you involved with them?" She brush back my hair, look at bandage on head again.

"Not involved – they just catch me scancam."

"Bulldogs," Ria say. "Corporate maybe."

"Well, that's a relief," say Mama, well-indoctrinated, or maybe just paranoid to say other. No one say it, but we all know we in danger just to have this vid. Law say we gotta turn it in right now – but you gotta be crazy do that once you know. Better be ignorant: loyal citizen report strange doing, happen to record it, just thought we let you know. Fine. They test you out, see you true, pat your head, make sure you got no copies hard or soft and you on your way. But none of us could pass. Five minutes with any one of us and they know we know. And then – even Mama couldn't say what then. Or wouldn't.

"We get outta here, Mama," I say, give her big hug. Papa too. "We take it with us – you got nothing to do with it." I feel like I'm talk to someone else, someone else listen. "Nothing at all," I say again.

"Where will you go?" ask Mama.

"We go."

Papa maybe miss the whole story, which is best, like I say.

"Don't forget, Leen," say Papa.

"I know – Leo rising. Good and evil. Very special." Papa smile. Okay I make fun if I understand his point.

I toggle-off monitor patch on the stereocam, hard store the vid under code and bulk the front porch. Clean at first glance, but if someone decide to take a real look, probably crack it open before it leave my pocket.

First thing we stop and pick up a box of storage cards. Stop for tube-post supplies too. Grab tram to Scumtown – more anonymous there. Me all beat-up and Ria in maintenance suit, we fit right in. We hole up in some fleabag.

In the tram I run the storage cards, delete the stereocam memory. Seal up the cards in 20 envelopes. Write names of government, press, corporate, the kinds of people like to get the goods on other people. Figure a few at least maybe come down on our side.

We grab a room in Allnight Hotel, very subtle name. No database of any kind except paper directory with sound-only phone. I look up addresses, add to all the packages, then go back out alone to Local North Airbus Terminal. Me nervous, switch trams three times, finish up with private taxi. At the old airport put the 20 envelopes in a locker, get the hell out. Then I ride three four different vehicles, still nervous but not so much now, pay call on Ben.

Ben work the recycling plant with me six years back, guy owe me one big time for yanking him out the aluminum crusher. I also tick off big chunk of credits to him, like near half my account, good for his family, but on hold till I release it. He know my word good, but wonder how he get paid if I don't make it.

"You get paid for the risk, and if I make it, you make it too," I tell him, setting logic aside. "If I don't make it, chalk it up. Just be glad I'm there to stop the crusher that day."

He figure that sound good. I run the procedure by him again, it all check out. Twenty-four hours to settle this thing, or he mail. I give him locker key, head back to Scumtown and the Allnight.

That weak-ass scumwaste Franklin's gonna take it every way I can dish it."

"Double-timed us for the last fucking time."

"I say we just do him." John Bull slapped his pistol into his palm.

"Gentlemen," Aoki interrupted. They hated his polite formality. "I count us fortunate to have boarded such a sluggish elevator. Had we already arrived, you might have acted from emotion. Surely we will stick to the plan, shall we not?"

The four bulldogs grunted. If he wasn't such a goddamned genius fucking hacker we'd've wasted his Nip attitude that first day, John Pit thought. Slanteye motherfuckers, thought John Blood. And John Whippet thought, Your ass, xerox-clone fishbreath.

The elevator opened on floor 80 and the tentative alliance moved on the target door. Whippet double-loaded his blaster rifle, erring well on the side of excess, and the door was propelled across the entire width of Franklin's crib and into the wall. The entire building shook.

Guns drawn, angry, they fanned-out through the rooms. Pit, especially, felt cheated to find Franklin absent. He kicked over the aquarium and watched the fish writhe against glass.

"Officer Pit, I believe you have a tracer instrument," said Aoki. "Please use it, or give it to one of your colleagues."

Disgusted, Pit tossed it to Blood, who, like Aoki with his own tracer, began running it over objects in the rooms. Pit and Whippet went about the more conventional task of breaking things apart, in case the polygon had been shielded. Bull sat down at Franklin's terminal and began work on the third and least promising method of discovery, the ransacking of files. Time con-

suming and pointless, he thought. I'd rather be ripping shit up. But he offloaded anything he could crack, in case they might have a use for it against Franklin later on. Gotta stay one step ahead of that slimebag, Bull thought.

Aoki, of course, was the one who found it, and he laughed aloud at Franklin's audacity. The black sphere rested on a crystalline display column in plain sight in the middle of the bedroom.

And now, Franklin's kill show, he thought, picking up the sphere; where that fails, turn them against each other; tertiary course, betray them to Authority. He walked to the front room, holding the sphere before him for all to see.

"Aoki, you're beautiful," said the vampire Bull, draining off the last of Franklin's computer.

"Word," said Blood.

"Word," echoed Whippet.

Aoki produced a small, curved piece of steel with a miniature display face and two heat contacts. He placed it on the sphere. The five men waited as it cycled through the random transmission codes, and less than twenty seconds later the sphere popped open at an invisible seam.

Aoki pocketed the transmitter and produced a set of frictionless tweezers. He extracted the blue icosahedron, holding it up so the others could observe and so that he could inspect it from all aspects. The unbroken facets of the crystal indicated that it had been grown around the gold rod suspended inside it. He shut it up in the protective sphere once more. Blood, who had alertly selected a wide sweep mode on his scanner, said, "Video. We're being watched. Lens recorder, portable. Multi-channel."

"Where?" Aoki asked. He locked the sphere into a small steel case which he cuffed to his wrist. The others looked reflexively out the window.

"Don't look, you idiots!" Blood snapped, and they turned back to Aoki. Blood stared down at the scanner display screen belted to his waist. "Straight across. I'll turn toward it – here. I'm right on the plane. Down 6 meters."

"Two floors," Bull said.

"There is a lens," said Aoki. "Give me a flashbeam. It will surely reflect."

"Got it, Jap-man," said Pit, and pulled the light off of his tool belt. Aoki took it, looked up, flashed the beam straight across, then quickly dropped it two stories. The lens gleamed back.

Bull and Whippet let loose with blasters, taking out Franklin's window and the back end of the eavesdropper's crib. They both ran to the open hole to watch the debris tumble down, cheering-on the presumedly splattered arrival of the nosy neighbor on the street below. Bull hurled the display screen from Franklin's terminal out the empty window frame, laughing hard with Whippet when it smashed into the rest of the wreckage.

The force of the darts from the handbows of Franklin's hitmen would have been enough to propel Bull and Whippet out of the building, even if the two projectiles had not perfectly pierced their hearts. Blood stood with a satisfied grin after the apparent destruction of the video voyeur, but defenseless with both hands on his scanner as the next two darts sliced through his heart, together, their tips finding a common endpoint in the left ventricle. Unlike Bull and Whippet, he had stood eye to eye with his assassin, and his jaw hung aghast as he dropped.

Pit managed to return fire, ducking behind a couch. Aoki cartwheeled to the wall, then out the doorless doorway when it appeared clear. The dart that struck him in the center of the upper back penetrated past the depth of the heart, and knocked him against the door of another crib. As he crumpled to the floor, he looked over his shoulder. One of the hitmen lay dead in the hallway, struck by Pit's fire; the other approached, expressionless, lowering his handbow and drawing a huge knife from his black plastic shell-jacket. The glowing ember in the shadows, Aoki knew, belonged to Franklin.

The hitman, wanting the briefcase, dropped the knife like a guillotine from over his head, but it recoiled violently off of Aoki's CroMoly-core arm and dropped to the floor. Aoki turned, just a rotation of a few degrees onto his side, and blasted a neat hole through the hitman's head. Bouncing to his feet, he trained the still-held flashbeam into the smokey shadows, but the ember now smoldered faintly in the carpet. Smoke swam out on the currents of Franklin's wake. Aoki, dart tip protruding from his chest, bounded effortlessly down the hallway in the direction opposite to Franklin's escape.

Pit lay still until he was sure no one was left. He was sweating heavily, breathing hard as he used his good arm to push himself up to a sitting posture. There was Blood, two white dart-feathers blooming from his blood-soaked chest. And someone's feet in the hallway – looked like one of the hitmen. He struggled up and moved cautiously to the door, his disabled arm swinging at his side. Two dead hitmen – probably fellow cops, the stupids. No Franklin. No fucking Jap. Never see him again, he thought.

Then he thought about his ass, cover, an alibi. He limped over to the hole where Franklin's window used to be. The wind blew hard into the crib. A small fire burned on what was left of the terrace they'd blasted. A pair of huge fire choppers approached, about a mile off. Two floors below, he saw the glimmer of the lens again. Another terrace, rubble all over it, and some fat Latisto looking up through a cam. Looking out at the city or the sky. Same cam? he wondered. It falls from the sky onto this guy's porch and now he's got it, maybe replaying and watching us, watching *me*, a cop, ripping off this bigtime dealer.

He picked up Whippet's blaster rifle and double-loaded it with a fire charge. One armed, he aimed for the city light reflected in the lens, and fired. The recoil jerked his body and his bleeding arm. He saw that he'd missed most of the target. Some peripheral fire appeared to have struck the fat man, but Pit saw the cam still in his hand as he stumbled back into the crib.

Pit reloaded, half blast half fire. A woman ran out now, and he pulled the trigger. A more direct hit on the terrace this time, and fire. The fire-chopper turned and shined its beacon into Franklin's crib and Pit fell back out of the light.

He stumbled out of the crib, wondering if he'd managed to destroy the spy cam, and if he hadn't, whether the recording showed the crystal, and all of them looking at it, and his face, especially his face.

I'm gonna kill Franklin, he thought. Double-crosser lifts the fucking crystal – *our* crystal, that we all stole together – then sets us up for the hit. But maybe Aoki got out with it. Could their copter still be on the roof? Probably be way too much to expect he'd wait for me, Pit thought.

He was right.

When I get back to the Allnight, guy at the desk give me real funny look when I ask for key. I get up there fast but I already know too late. Nothing look different in the empty room, only the mirror broke. Stereocam lie on the bed, still made, a little rumpled is all. I pick it up, touch battery test, everything look OK, put it back on bed. Then I see real strange thing.

On the windowsill, a black sphere, like the one the Chinese-looking guy crack open in Lester's place, on a stand like a display nicknack. This make no sense, I think, and walk over and pick it up.

"It's empty," voice come from the shadows and I jump. He step out into neon red/blue/red from Allnight street sign. It Lester, I mean Franklin.

"It's not even the same one, as a matter of fact. Just an old shell from an old shell game," he laugh, like a gurgle. "I've, shall we say, *brokered* a number of them. Very, *very* lucrative. But they require substantial outlays in the acquisition. Losing one puts a heavy strain on the cash flow. You wouldn't want me to have to go back to peddling napalm to the kiddies in your project, would you?"

"Fuck you," my only answer to that shit.

Very thin lips, tight. Quarter-inch razor cut white hair stand on his head and thin, white-line moustache over those skinny lips. Cheek bones sunk like maybe he sample some of the goods himself in his napalm days.

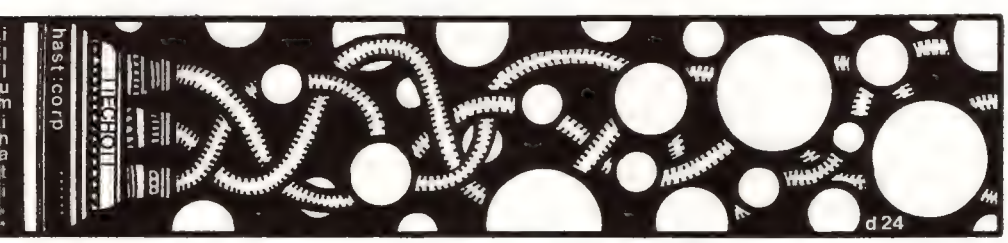
"I don't like *darkies*, Leen, so I don't like you. Or your greaser girlfriend. But mostly I hate fucking Japs. Ruin our fucking country, make it tough on all good businessmen, above or below the law. They fuck you every way and smile the whole goddamn time until finally you smile back and then they've got your ass. So I'll work with you – and you'll work for me. For the good of the people, eh?"

He grin. I don't get his meaning, but the drift, maybe. I know I'm insulted when I hear it, but seems like some backways compliment in there somewhere.

He walk over to the bed, pick up my cam. "I watched your little home movie, Leen." He just stare, make me squirm.

"I should really beat your brains out with this toy, my eavesdropping friend. I could beat your brains out and I wouldn't feel a thing. Know that about me."

I want to hit his face to shut him up, or just walk out, or make him say where Ria go, where he take her, but I can't, I know he the control here, and he has his crazy story to tell so I listen. I only hope he not planning to waste me for some looney punchline.




"I understand," he reply, so cool. "If only I could forget that inglorious chapter in my career."

"Where is she," I ask, clenching my fists and move toward him.

"Don't be stupid Leen, or Leem, or whatever the hell she said it was."

I see the little dart weapon in his hand now. He walk up to me, breathe his candy-sweet breath in my face. He small, about my height. Dress in black suit, shirt, black half-tie. His face smooth, like white plastic. Look like cosmetic knife salon job – probably look like moon before. Real pale blue eyes, hardly any color at all, almost white, and the whites real clean like his face, too smooth, no little blood vessels at all.

"This recording could be very dangerous in the wrong hands." He hold up the cam and kinda shake it at me. "How stupid are you?"

He maybe sound a little nervous. I wonder if I got him – don't *feel* like I got him. I think he got me.

"No one see it yet. You bring me Ria or the story go out, bigtime." I look him straight, try to tough it, but he gurgle laugh again, the crazy paste-face.

"You think I care? Go ahead, show the world, what do I care? You think this can hurt me? At the worst it might represent a tiny inconvenience, an hour of questioning, a night in the chill at the outside."

He walk up to my face again, now angry, crazy mood-shifter. "Which I would *not* appreciate."

He back off. "I can kill you, I can let you live. I can kill your friend or not, as I please. The recording does not incriminate *me*. They broke into *my* crib, I wasn't even there. Police officers, and –" he hold the cam up to his eyes, I don't think he actually turn it on "– oh my, look, isn't that Aoki, the infamous database cracker from Daikko? What's he doing with these officers of the law? And what is that object they're handling? Isn't that, oh my, it *is*, a highly contraband Network Link, top security clearance levels only. This looks distinctly like illegal activity, wouldn't you say?"

He lower the cam, look at me sly. "Didn't know it could be done, eh? This consumer junk is easily recovered. The chip alignment-changes leave residual vibration in the casing. The tracer is no cheap toy, but hey – do I look cheap to you?

"You've done me a favor, Leen. If I'd thought of this," he say, waving the cam, "I wouldn't have even had to kill them. I might've pulled in some good blackmail revenue."

But then he say, "No. It's safer this way. They did their job and I paid them off. Very off." He laugh that loon laugh make me shiver. "And AgCorp will more than cover what the bullodogs could have given me." Then he shake my hand like we just make some deal. His hand all dry like sand, make my stomach drop.

So I join up with Franklin, or so he say. We get taxi, leave Scumtown, but why I still feel like I got the scum on me? His story make sense so I think maybe we get rich. He the one carry the weapon, though, so maybe just he get rich and me and Ria get dead.

Seems Aoki, the Japanese I thought Chinese, work for Daikko Corp, or for USA Government, Inc. No matter which, because Daikko in same multicorp as USA Government: AgCorp. Which you know is world biggest. They powerful, but not *all*-powerful, and Franklin figure maybe he can use my movie "tactically," blackmail some Daikkos he know, some cops on the take, hold out threat of FBI exposure.

FBI one division of USA Gov. that AgCorp seem to have little control over. Not big players, but control certain physical means. Big inconvenience and embarrassment for Daikko their executives get questioned, locked up. Okay for guy like Franklin, he got slimeball rep already, but for honor of Daikko very bad, bad against competition, and certainly hurt them in eyes of other shareholders in AgCorp. Bad for business.

That his strategy, really. "A little pocket change," he call it – talk about crystal as "big score," like he already got it. Make no sense. He tell me about how him and hitmen fight it out with Aoki and bulldogs, one bulldog make it, called Pit, and Pit work for Franklin now too. Sound like no choice for Pit, same as for me.

Only place worse than Scumtown is Dogtown, where all the Doggers live. Doggers savage assholes, hunt dogpacks for sport, eat them too. Rumor human meat get in the mix sometimes, don't surprise me. By time we get to Dogtown sun come up, so when we step out cab in industrial graveyard we got the shades, hats, sleeves, screen, the works on. I'm wonder if maybe that's why Franklin got the facejob – I seen what can happen you fuck with the UV. Supposed to be building some space patch up there rotate with the earth and block it out, but they say the hole ripping like a bad artery now and platform construction can't keep up. It seem hotter everyday, you ask me.

Pit paced the cement floor of the abandoned warehouse loft. Compulsively, he traced and retraced his steps from the freight elevator to the windows and back, glancing up once each cycle at Ria, who was handcuffed to a steel eye-hook embedded deep in a thick wooden support beam. He sweated continuously and his suspenders chaffed against his soaked shoulders. His wounded arm, in a sling, pressed up against his body and made it even hotter. In his shirtsleeves and black pants pulled high on his fat round belly by the suspenders, the just-over five foot tall Pit looked to Ria like an unshaven Humpty-Dumpty. She couldn't help smiling.

"Quit grinning, bitch!" Pit growled at her, and she frowned back. Real bitches howled on the street ten stories below.

"Fuckin' Dogtown," Pit muttered. "God I hate this place." He cranked the volume on the narcoscanner to drown out the street noise. They'd put out an APB on him, after the Franklin crib mess. Guys he knew were calling in leads. They weren't making him out to be some missing person victim, either.

Except for the gun held ready at all times in his good hand, and the handcuffs on her wrist, nothing about Pit intimidated Ria. He was a typical bulldog, stupid, nervous, overweight, hiding behind his weapon and, usually, behind the rest of his pack. Alone, he was scared, she could see that. One on one, she could break him in half. Maybe even with him holding the gun, she thought, if I could seize the moment.

Ria had seen him put the radio key to the handcuffs in the inner pocket of the suitcoat that lay draped over the chair just out of her reach.

The chatter on the scanner cut out for a moment, and the dog howls and gunfire, dog yelps and men's voices and more gunfire, rose up to the loft again. The elevator started to ascend, the motor whirring loudly.

Pit jumped behind one of the fifty or so support beams that divided the loft into a grid. "Keep your trap shut," he barked at Ria. "One word and ..." He waved the gun at her.

Elevator clang stop, jerk up a few more inches and clang again. The heavy metal doors part and I see Ria, chain to big beam. She look tired, eyes sunk and shadow from bare incandescent hang beam over her. I want to run to her, but I hold. I look quick around the dark loft, try to adjust vision and track movement at the same time.

"Pit!" snap Franklin. "Get your ass out here, Pit!"

Franklin walk up to Ria, lift her wrist to check the cuffs, wink lewd. A short fat guy – look real familiar – step out from the dark mass of pillars. This must be Pit. Now I remember him – one of the guys who trash Franklin's crib. As he walk up to Pit, I look at Ria and she signal with her eyes to a chair and must be Pit's jacket. I slide over and stand next to it.

"You're late," Pit say.

"No, my friend," Franklin say. "It's you that is late." He gurgle.

"Why'd you bring him?" Pit wave his gun at me. "I thought you'd do him."

"Pit, Pit, Pit. We still don't have the cards, remember? We kill him now and a lot of important people are going to see a replay of you and your friends, off duty, helping Daikko Corp expropriate a highly protected drive mechanism."

Franklin go on. "I've watched it," he say, "and it doesn't look good. For you, for the rest of the bulldogs, for the country in general." He twist the blackmail tight on Pit.

"You don't care about the goddamn country," Pit say. "You just care about money."

"Let's not have the pot calling the kettle black, Pit."

"What're you trying to *do* to me?" Pit ask loud, but panicky."

"Pit, Pit, Pit. Don't *worry*. I need your talents. Look, we'll get the Link back," he say, "and then ..." He walk up to Pit and whisper in his ear. Pit grin, look at me and Ria, nod and grin like some fool.

Ria mouth, 'Pocket, pocket,' to me and I slide into the chair and quick search the pockets of Pit's jacket. In the last pocket I palm out a flat plate with a tiny raised button in the center. As Franklin lean over to whisper to Pit, I press the button. Hear a little click behind. Pit and Franklin turn toward us, I glance over shoulder at Ria, she nod. The cuffs off her.

"Your prisoner is free," a Japanese-accent voice echo from the stairwell door. Chinese-looking guy from Franklin's crib step forward. "The quality of your protection is slipping, Franklin-san."

Pit drop fast and fire but Japan-man already cartwheeling past Ria and me, we drop down behind a beam together. Japan-man strike Pit full-face with both legs extended. Second shot crackle useless from Pit's weapon as he hurtle back toward elevator. His head strike the wooden floor inside the cab and he roll to his back, moaning.

Japan-man pick up Pit's weapon, walk over to him semi-conscious on the floor, and melt his face off. Then he drop the weapon on Pit's gut, which has stop rise and fall.

"You were finished with him, correct?" Japan-man ask Franklin.

"Right." Franklin look at Ria. "He was through babysitting. You run it?"

"It's run." Japan-man hand something to Franklin.

"Very good," say Franklin, turn it over once in his hand. It sparkle blue. He toss it to me. The crystal.

"A present – the source of all this confusion. Quite useless now. Locked out by its own entry code once it was detected on line." He turn back to Japan. "We are rich now, aren't we?"

"Much *too* rich, Franklin-san."

"USA?"

"Forty-eight per cent, Franklin-san. All of the lan-bean futures."

"You're a genius, Aoki-san." They both laugh like this some kind of delightful joke.

"Aoki," Franklin say to me and Ria, "being too smart to be tracked via a mere entry tag, has succeeded in obtaining the credits and commodities I required to expand and diversify my enterprise. After a while, detecting the illegal and bogus transactions, the Network invalidated our access, but not before the crucial transactions occurred, disassociated from the tag code, under cover of decoys, disguised and laundered.

"What you do with the crystal now is your business. But I wouldn't recommend linking-up. Though, hell, you might as well try it if you ever get out of here, which you won't. Does that make sense?"

Franklin laugh gurgle and step over Pit's body into the freight elevator. Aoki follow him in.

"The link-up was done here, on the floor below," say Franklin. "They'll trace it here in, oh, I'd say – what do you think, Aoki? Ten minutes? They'll find the two of you, the crystal, and a dead bulldog. I expect they'll just shoot you on sight – information criminals and all. Best to cover these things up rather than air them out in the Network. Don't you agree?"

"I still got the cards," I say, kinda weak though. "They mail today."

"Oh, yes, your home movie," Franklin gurgle. "I'd almost forgotten. Awful lot of trouble and embarrassment for the police and Daikko that'll be, eh, Aoki? Enough, perhaps, to entice them to help us acquire, say, three per cent of USA, Inc. I'm sure they'll consider that a reasonable fee."

Aoki and Franklin laugh together, and now I get why the two of them together seem so uncanny. Their laughs identical. Franklin move around behind Aoki and reach into his collar. Something click and Aoki's head hinge back. Franklin pull up on it and it come off. He stand there holding the head while the Aoki's body walk into the elevator.

"Sixth generation," he say. "I wonder if the real Aoki has a clean alibi for the night we staged our raid? I hope so, for Aoki's sake, because otherwise Daikko's not going to like what they see on your movie. They're not going to like it in any case.

"You do what you want with those cards," Franklin say, waving the stereocam. "I'll just make my own copies from the residual memory. Maybe I can generate some pocket change before yours go public. I've got all day."

The headless Aoki android start to push Pit's body out of the elevator, but Franklin stop him. "No, let's bring him down. Put him outside for the dogs." He look at Ria and me, try to scare us. "Or for the Doggers."

The elevator doors close, just catch an edge of Pit's shoe, then slam shut past it. The gears and pulleys engage loud and it whir down, leave me, Ria, the cancelled Link crystal, police radio, pair of handcuffs, a chair and Pit's jacket with cigarettes, matches, car and house keys and the handcuff radio key.

Nothing we can use and the staircase door electrobolted by the Aoki. It don't even rattle. Ria try the radio key on it, but no go. Worth a try. Elevator hit bottom and we try call it back. Nothing. Sheer drop from windows, nothing to climb down by to next storey, no rope, nothing here. Loft cleaned-out. Start thinking about tie clothes together, but we lean out see no windows on nine or eight. No way can we drop down to seven with only a couple pairs of pants and such tied together. We stuck. We wait.

Minute maybe two after they hit bottom we hear the howls and soon they get loud, grow in number and we hear the feeding. Lean out we can see six eight dogs rip into Pit. Doggers follow soon we know.

"We gotta call them," Ria say. "It's our only chance."

"You loon? They come up here waste us," I say. "Use us for bait! You don't know Doggers – they only know meat."

In the end she listen to me. We watch the dogs and first dog fall we hardly hear shot. Then shots ring and two more dogs fall, others scatter to the broken streets. Doggers, three, come out running, can't wait for meat. Start tying legs and such together to drag off three dead dogs. Ria get ready to call out but, like I say, in the end she believe me cause I point look, she look, and while two Doggers carry off the kills, the other one bend down over Pit and do something awful. He reach into Pit gut and raise stuff to his nose, maybe mouth, hard to tell from high up. Then he tie Pit legs and hands together like dog and drag him. We know then there no point to call out. We slide back away from window, hope no one see us.

"You think that pewter really down there on floor below?" Ria ask. "Been fifteen minutes and no sign of infonarcs. And Franklin take Pit down there instead of leave him here as evidence like he say. What goes on?"

"Don't know," I say. Nothing else to say.

"There has to be a way to get down there," Ria say. "We could climb down the elevator shaft." We try pulling elevator doors open, but no. We try chair as wedge, try call button at same time we pull, everything. Franklin kill it good.

Finally, we just lie down, try to stay warm up against elevator doors where hot air rise through shaft. Try cover with Pit's jacket, but it seem like death and we throw it off. No narcos come, so we sleep, I drift, wonder if Franklin just want to scare us, or if they come after all, any minute. Maybe they don't trace the Link ident code, maybe the crystal still good! Wonder again if that pewter really down there on nine but mostly wonder how we get out, and then how we get outta Dogtown. Maybe easier when it get dark – but maybe harder, don't know. Don't really know Dogtown.

Near sunset we see the way out, something we don't see in the dingy loft all day long. As sun get low it fall on west wall of building and outline seams in a little door hatch, up near ceiling level back in the corner. I boost Ria up and no lock on it she pop it right open, swing out. She hang on, look out and the fire escape there. Fire escape! Why we forget about that last night? Old buildings have them always and if there none out the windows it gotta be somewhere else. We shoulda thought.

Pass nine on the way down and look in the hatch there, see no pewter. I run in fast and look around. Ria want to just go on, almost go without me, but I gotta look. No pewter. Franklin bluff-ass liar, just scare us for sadistic pleasure. Shoul-

da guess it from a napalm pusher.

We get down and get outta Dogtown, which look about like Scumtown or even Hometown in the twilight, only a few more dogs wander and some uglier garbage, the kind you smell before you see it. Real horror of Dogtown those sounds – the howls, the fighting, snarling, seem to be down every alley. In a way I guess it not so different from Hometown, but it gotta be worse.

We talk about go back to the plex, but decide not yet, bulldogs probably wait for us, lotta questions, too late for Jorge now anyway, they probably ship him to organ salvage or fry him. At least he not end up like Pit.

I figure let Ben mail the cards. So what. Most places ignore it, maybe one or two like the television ones make something of it. Heist of a Network Link nothing to sneeze at. I don't much care if Daikko and AgCorp look bad even if they not involved here, cause they bad enough everywhere else. Figure not much point in try and tell the real story, me just some homeboy and Ria be Latista and all. Probably find a way to bust us we try and go public. No one but bad people in my movie, so let it play, anonymous.

Figure Mama know, if anybody, what this Link crystal can do so I decide to run by. Place to shack till the heat blow, too. Ria need to make the daily slave though. "I might try that recycle mill out on the river. Put in ten to twelve and head back for Hometown. Should be clear enough by then."

"A bad plant, that one," I tell her. "Too old. They still doing toxics there. Right next to Dogtown, too."

Ria laugh. "Not afraid of Dogtown now. I've been there." Then she kiss me, what a deal. "Don't worry, I'm careful. See you back at the plex." She head down steps to the subway. "Check in on my girl if you get there before me," she call back, disappear into the tunnel.

Back in Hometown, I stand in P&M's crib, look out sooty window at the plex to the east, rising sun burn up behind it. Whole thing look on fire now, wouldn't surprise me. Mama look for long time at crystal, then finally say, "This no ordinary Network hook-up, Leonard. Not what I thought on the pictures you shot. This what they call a Lattice Encoded Ordinance driver – factory set for one access, but deep. From what you say, this Franklin probably use it to enter the Commodities Elite market. You can buy anything grown, buried or lie on top of the earth there – black market, white market or gray. Make sense for a napalm pusher – that stuff much more pure you distill it from the lan-bean. The synthetic not so good, some reason. They don't have all the multi-alkaloidal interactions figure out yet."

Mama lose me there. I got one smart Mama. She learn a lot in that processor warehouse. Keep her ears open. Papa, he grin.

"What I tell you, son? What I say about your stars?"

"You say Leo rising, I know. I still keep an eye out." I wink at Papa, good to keep him in humor.

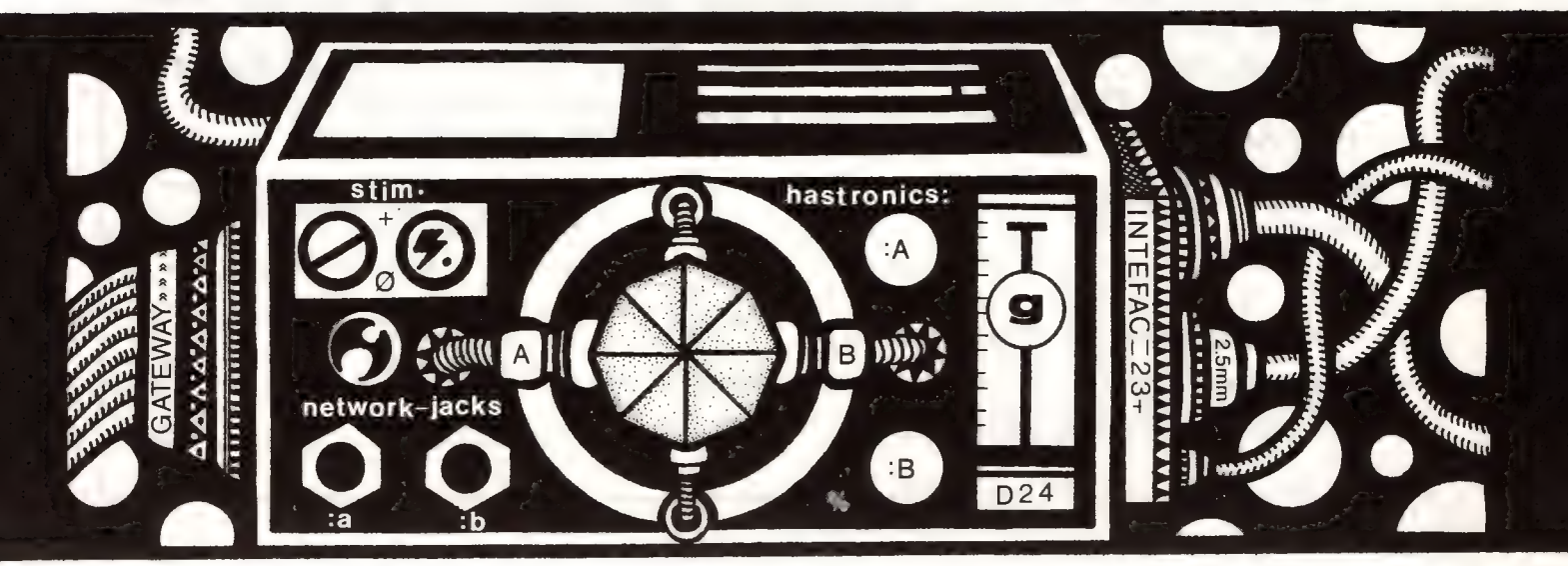
"Maybe Papa right this time," Mama say, and that grab me. She usually at best tolerate Papa's mystic, with all her tekno-think. "Lattice Encoded Ordinance: L–E–O. And a rising fortune for you, son. For all of us. Thing about a custom link like this – it can be reopen, even after the code is terminate, in listen-only mode."

I just look blank, but Mama so excited, I know something good about to happen.

"Leonard, this a working Network Link. It *still* a Network Link. Might take me a while – I'll have to consult with a couple of old friends ..." she wink, "... but I think we can change it over. Can watch the world spin with this, no doubt."

Watch the world sound good to me, that basically my way. Mama gonna make this thing work, I believe she will. Won't buy us *in* to the system – you can go in but you can't touch anything, can't interact – but you can watch, keep an eye on things. Watch the information flow by and bide your time. Maybe one day, maybe another chance, maybe learn where to look for a way past just a way in, a way to move things around or, like Ria say, seize the moment. That moment maybe roll across my screen someday, maybe not, but I got good shows, pictures to watch till then. You can't play, you might as well watch. ❑

David Hast resides near Chicago, USA. He watches a lot of movies, and has a small business, also media-related. Married, with two cats and a short-wave radio, of the unreasonably warm winter of 1989-1990, he grumbles: "I can't enjoy it – it's global warming." Unlike the American press, he does not equate McDonald's restaurants with democracy.



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## VOICES
### by Tim Wynne-Jones.

**Hodder & Stoughton, June 1990, ISBN 0 340 51080 3. 304pp, £11:95.**

*Voices* is a novel of contrasts. It is part romance, part ghost story and partly psychoanalytical, following the course of one woman's nervous breakdown. It contains much that is good, well-written and well-crafted, with passages of rich and melodic prose.

The story follows Alexis Forgeben on her journey to England from Canada after a nervous breakdown. In England she stumbles across the crumbling manor-house of Fastyngange, inhabited by a 'talking hole', an oubliette, and the ghosts of those this garrulous hole has seduced into its depths through the ages.

Suffice to say that the hole casts its evil spell over Alexis, who agrees to 'carry' it back home to Canada, saving it from destruction when the manor-house is demolished, and in the mistaken belief that this hole may hold the key to her own breakdown and that of her marriage.

*Voices* is not without its flaws, however, one of which is the main narrative voice. The tale is told by the 'talking hole' which, apart from demanding a major suspension of belief in the reader, often offers information to which it could not possibly have access. Granted, anyone with a little patience would overlook these hiccups in order to fully enjoy what *is* a good yarn, were it not for the fact that Mr Wynne-Jones' talking hole demonstrates its omniscience with annoying regularity.

Another flaw is the author's use of some really rare – and unimpressively long – words, which struck me as totally out of place in this context and sent me scuttling to

## Earth rising

### THE HOME PLANET
### Images and Reflections of Earth from Space Explorers.

**Conceived and edited by Kevin W. Kelley & The Association of Space Explorers. MacDonald/Queen Anne Press. £20.**

"It was a texture. I felt like I could reach out and touch it. It was so intense. The blackness was so intense." Charles Duke Jr, USA.

A quotation from a horror novel – the new Barker, perhaps, or a Herbert? No, the above passage comes from a new book that is going to make you think seriously about the Earth and the space around it. *The Home Planet* is the ultimate coffee table book – a glossy volume that is crammed with the best photographs I've ever seen of our planet. The difference here is that these pictures weren't taken by earthbound explorers, but were taken from near-earth orbit by American and Russian spacecraft. And these aren't the usual LANDSAT-type photos either, where you need a degree in geography and geology to decipher the infra-red images – no, these photos were taken by the astronauts with conventional cameras. What you see was truly there for the human eye to see.

The above quotation is only one of a hundred or more, a chorus of voices that try to explain what it is like to be in space, and more importantly, what the Earth looks like from up there. Even now, after nearly 30 years of manned spaceflight, climbing up through the gravity well is still an exclusive business best left to the professional. So it seems fitting that they should tell the story. And they do so with an honesty that is both striking and lyrical. It isn't just an American/Russian view, either – there are quotes from French, German, Polish, Saudi Arabian, Afghan and other foreign astronauts who have all climbed that pillar of fire.

Undoubtedly, the Earth is the star of this book. We see her in a glory that is on the verge of fading. The beauty of the oceans, the dancing swirl of a storm, the copper sheen of the mountain ranges, all remind us of what we have – and more importantly, what we stand to lose very soon if pollution and the Greenhouse Effect are allowed to progress. This isn't an ecological tome – if it was nobody would buy it. Instead, it is a joyful re-affirmation of where we live, and where we stand as a new century dawns. At £20 this isn't a book to buy on a whim, but see if your library has a copy – it may just convince you that Greenpeace and the Friends of the Earth have a point after all.

"On the floor to the left of the running track is a porthole. I love running and looking at the Earth. It isn't important whose she is, just that she is." Oleg Atkov, USSR.

*John Peters* ❑

the dictionary.

With those two moans aside, however, I can say that I enjoyed *Voices* greatly, for the story is well told and the characters reasonably drawn, even the ghosts.

Most outstanding though is Wynne-Jones' skillful insight into the workings of the human mind, for his portrayal of the distraught, confused and mentally ill Alexis is good enough to make re-reading *Voices* a must.

*Chris Whitmore* ❑

## NARCOPOLIS & other poems
### Edited by Peggy Nadramia.

**A5, 64pp, $4 from Hell's Kitchen Productions Inc., PO Box 370, Times Square Station, New York, NY 10108, USA. ISBN 0 962328 61 8**

In America *Grue* magazine is to horror to what *New Pathways* is to SF, so we're off to a damn fine start straight away. How often have you heard "don't judge a book by its cover"? Well I did, and the front of *Narcopolis* is *good!* It's not one of those covers that insist that 'horror' is a gut-exploding, blood-splattering feast but instead relies on strange, often deeply frightening montages. Harry O. Morris' cover sets the trend for most of the magazine with strange and truly alien images. The cover gets its effect by crossing what seems to be a crayfish (something I've personally always loathed) and a skeleton and eyes. Perched atop this there lies an eyeless and noseless human head which is fixed with a constant grimace. Uurgh!

But what about the contents then? Well, this is where the cover has indeed proved to be a good omen for the contents, apart from the very first offering. We kick off with a long piece by Wayne Allen Sallee, a writer probably familiar to regular **BBR** readers. Apparently this guy is big in the States, but I'm afraid that the poem he offers, from which the collection derives its name, just doesn't really work. It starts off well but just sort of fizzles out. Granted there are some really good touches in there, but the promise of a fine piece doesn't arrive.

Apart from Sneyd, Darlington (the only two British poets as far as I know, if I'm wrong then any others are new to me), Jurgens, Boston and Don Webb, all the other poets are unknown to me. But I believe that these 'new' poets offer the best in the collection. J. Peter Orr with "Death Came Down Upon Her" is an absolute gem, as is G. Sutton Brierding's "Suite For The Tomb Of Her Tongue".

As mentioned earlier, the British contingent are represented rather weakly: Steve Sneyd's "There Is A Happy Land" to put it simply is not Steve at his best. Andy Darlington, who is often very reliable, this time appears not to be! He offers some very good icons and imagery (as always), but he spoils it with repetition. Maybe he was striving for a certain effect which didn't come off.

t. Winter-Damon's "Ghost Images" is, well, next please! Yet his "Babylon" is rather traditional and a touch gothic for his usual style and makes a refreshing change. Don Webb is, as ever, on good form with a smart piece of prose which is touched on gently with humour. Bruce Boston offers cyberhorror! Actually the cyberpunk imagery is there, but so is the horror – very subliminal and effective.

This collection does not just deserve full marks for production, but also the contents: poetry and artwork. It's a pleasure to see a collection of poetry so consistent and good being published/edited by someone who derives pleasure from the genre in which she works. More please.

*Dave W. Hughes* ❑

## THE AUTUMN LAND
### & other stories
### by Clifford D. Simak.

**Mandarin, ISBN 0 7493 0185 6.**
**172pp, £3:50.**

Six short stories make up this collection by the late Clifford D. Simak, selected and with a sympathetic introduction by Frank Lyall. All the stories are classic treatments of traditional SF themes, such as time travel and encounters with alien lifeforms.

Simak is credited with with having one of the more distinctive styles in science fiction, due no doubt to his full-time work as a newspaper journalist. As this was my first encounter with his work, I was struck by the the simple narrative form and the overall economy of language that he adopted. Yet this simplicity could easily lull the reader into a false sense of security, and makes Simak's presentation of the unknown or the unexpected all the more effective. For example, the last piece in the collection, "Autumn Land", is particularly chilling precisely because of the apparent calmness with which it is written.

Each story has the conventional format of beginning/middle/end, but I was often left with the impression that the storyline could have gone on further, which a lesser writer might have allowed it to do. In his introduction, Frank Lyall comments that "Rule 18" was one of the first SF stories published to be told in separate scenes without the usual "transitional material" in between. That the reader is left to fill in some of the spaces, rather than being constantly spoon-fed with "what happened next", is therefore a deliberate part of the entertainment.

For the most part, Simak concentrates on the triumph of traditional, homely values as a panacea to change: in "Courtesy", respect for oneself and for others wins the day, even in an alien environment; commercialism and exploitation are defeated in "Gleaners". Perhaps these then could be classed as SF fables?

The humour contained in these stories often cuts through Simak's tendency to over-indulge in sentimentality. However, his recent appearance in the feature "SF Literature We Can Do Without..." in *The Scanner* #7 suggests that a full novel with all the homespun philosophy intact can prove unpalatable. Mike Ashley was one of the many who leapt to Simak's defence in the following issue, but even he had to admit that Simak's award-winning novel *City* works because it is "a series of episodes originally published as separate stories."

Five out of the six pieces in this collection were first published before 1960, the exception being "The Autumn Land", which was published in 1969. It is understandable then that the language and characterisation can appear dated. As Lyall also points out, the background of "Rule 18" is now flawed due to our present knowledge of other planets. (The story deals with the annual football game between a team from Earth and a team of Martians, the venue being either Guja Tant on Mars or New York City.)

Despite recent comments that Simak *is* now "old-fashioned", the collection reflects the attitudes of the era in which the pieces were written. He seems to inspire either great admiration or complete dismissal, but I believe the collection merits reading for its entertainment value alone.

*A.T.* ❑

# Also received:

## THE PALADIN
### by C.J. Cherryh.

**Mandarin, ISBN 0 7493 0243 7.**
**383pp, £3:99.**

In an oriental fantasy world of myth and legend, the spoiled naïve successor to the old emperor is a puppet in the hands of evil and corrupt men. ❑

## HUNTER OF WORLDS
### by C.J. Cherryh.

**Mandarin, ISBN 0 7493 0212 7.**
**254pp, £3:50.**

Aiela, a world-survey officer, finds himself abducted to serve the Iduve clanship – the most advanced spacefaring race in the galaxy. ❑

## CHIMERA #1-3

**A4, 28pp. #1 £1, #2 & #3 70p each from Asylum Magazines, 7 Walmersley Road, New Moston, Manchester M10 0RS**

The Chimera was originally a monster from Greek mythology with the head of lion, the body of a goat and the tail of a serpent. It has now come to symbolise a wild or fanciful conception, or a horrible creature of the imagination. It's in this latter guise that the slant of this magazine is best appreciated.

Initially conceived as a means for its editors to explore their preoccupations with modern society and the environment, the bulk of the magazine features short stories by Sharon Schofield and strips by Robert Haynes. More recent editions have also taken on board contributions from the likes of David Windett, Jeremy Clarke and Des Lewis.

With a strong environmental and ecological message underlying much of the fiction and artwork, *Chimera* suggests that the 'horrible creature of the imagination' of its title has already been set loose in modern life, in the form of urban decay, personal alienation and the loss of spirituality in favour of material greed.

Though the darker subject matter is in danger of becoming oppressive at times, this is more than outweighed by the bright variety of ideas and situations used to express the themes, and the enthusiasm with which they are presented. ❑

## THE EDGE #1

**A4, 32pp, £1:30 from 56 Writtle Road, Chelmsford, Essex CM1 3BU** ◆◆◆

New magazines have been springing up all over the place in the UK recently, though maybe *The Edge* is one that more noise has been made about than most.

Now that it's here at last, *The Edge* follows up its promises with a strong line-up of contributors, including stories by Simon Clark, D.F. Lewis, David W. Hughes and Paul Roland. For the most part, however, the fiction is sadly uninspiring, with the most notable exception being Simon Clark's "The Dead Bury the Dead", a chilling tale of revenge and exploitation, and Paul Roland's "Pulp", reprinted from an earlier collection.

In comparison then, by far the best elements of the magazine are the critical items. These include an overview of Edgar Allen Poe by Andy Darlington, an introduction to Sheridan Le Fanu by Mike Ashley, and an appraisal by Kevin Lyons of William Gibson's 'Sprawl' stories. As one has come to expect from journalists of this calibre, the articles are balanced, well-researched and written without pretensions. Christine Scott also revisits the holocaust TV movie *The Day After* to assess its effects nuclear awareness, but John Light's essay on how to write science fiction is the odd one out here, coming across as facile and self-indulgent.

With illustrations only sparsely scattered through the magazine, a creditable attempt has been made to enliven pages of dense copy with titles and credits, but the typewriter text still gives *The Edge* the feel of a fanzine rather than reflecting the professional aspirations of its publisher. Perhaps if as much effort and expense had been put into the production of the magazine as has been put into the hype surrounding it, the first issue of *The Edge* would be giving many better established magazines something serious to worry about. ➢

# Energy and anger

## GLOBAL TAPESTRY JOURNAL #20

**A5, 88pp, £1:80 from BB Books, Spring Bank, Longsight Road, Copster Green, Blackburn, Lancs BB1 9EU.**

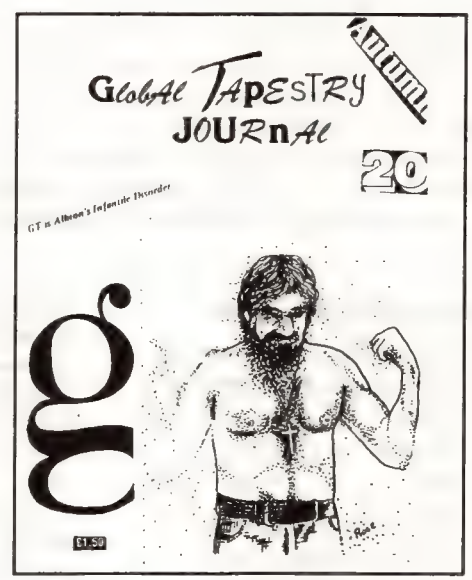
Back at last after a two-year lay-off, *GTJ* is a magazine whose tradition extends right back to the early 1960s, and the spirit of the mimeograph revolution which first sidestepped commercial publishing and brought popular writing back to its roots.

The opening section of this delayed issue is a tribute to the American poet George Montgomery, who died on 22 June 1987. A friend of Kerouac, Ginsberg and many other Beat poets, Montgomery was one of the major influences of the 1960s British Poetry Renaissance, and a guiding light for magazines like *GTJ*. Here, friends and contemporaries pay homage to Montgomery in the form of anecdotes and recollections, showing him to be a man of warmth and compassion who rejoiced in the richness of life, but also a man who still retained into middle age his refusal to conform, remaining forever vibrant with energy and anger.

It is that persistent energy and anger that characterizes *GTJ*. Whilst the Montgomery tribute is understandably the focal point of this issue, the poetry and prose in the remainder of the magazine uphold that fine tradition. In particular, one short piece of fiction, "Mummy's Eyes" by Arthur Moyse (whose distinctive artwork also liberally punctuates the pages), is a work of horror containing more subtlety, precision and panache in its single page than many entire "shock horror" bestsellers I have read recently.

Elsewhere, the review section provides a point of contact with a whole range of small press poetry and fiction magazines, its candour and extensive listings making this part of the magazine the nearest British equivalent to *Factsheet Five*.

Reaching out to people at grass roots level, *GTJ* upholds




poetry's older oral roots, where language remains a living, evolving organism unshackled by the restraining conformity of schools and publishers. The magazine was described in 1969 as depending "almost wholly on individual initiative, on people spurred to 'doing their thing'", with "spontaneity, free imagination, immediacy and [a] wholist commitment". It's a credit to editor Dave Cunliffe that 20 years on it remains true to those same ideals of freedom of expression and refusal to conform.

*GTJ* is a magazine for people who are anxious to expand their world-view and seek new experiences, for people who are not afraid of new ideas. ❑

# Accessible

## WORKS #5

**A5, 56pp, £1:25 from 12 Blakestones Road, Slaithwaite, Huddersfield HD7 5UQ**

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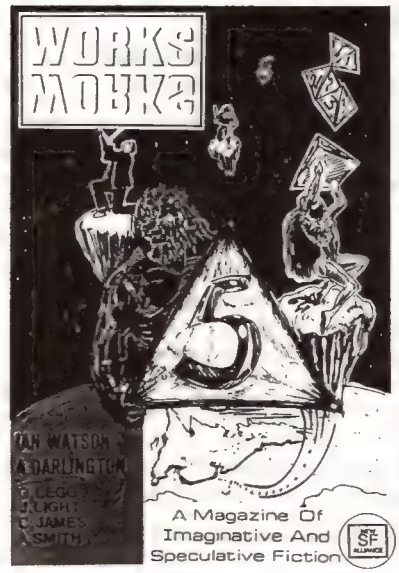


Continuing with the smaller but clearer and much more readable typeface introduced in *Works* #4, this issue sees the magazine settling into the new format with greater confidence and sense of direction. It's probably just a coincidence, but the fiction seems to benefit as a result, perhaps because larger stories are more easily catered for, or there's room for a greater range of fiction in a single issue. Chris James' "Unforgettable", an inventive stream-of-consciousness account of memory vampirism, and "City of Joe", Elliot Smith's tale of an out-of-towner absorbed by the Big City gutter-life, are the prominent pieces in this issue, with poignant tales of spiritual exhaustion in various guises by John Light, Andrew Vaughan and Andy Smith following close behind. Matthew Dickens, Tony Dash, J.F. Haines and Andy Darlington are amongst those who contribute to what is perhaps the most varied and accessible issue of *Works* so far.

Especially noticeable in this issue is the influence of artist Kevin Cullen, who made his debut in #4 and whose artwork now appears liberally throughout the magazine. His illustrations bring depth and maturity and also a sense of consistency, whilst his 4-page strip "Obsolete" provides a striking centrepiece to the magazine.

In its relatively short life *Works* has already carved out a substantial niche for itself. Like **BBR**, it is not content to stand still, and the recent changes are but a part of the series of improvements projected for the magazine. Not for nothing is *Works* a backbone of the NSFA, and the nearest **BBR** has to a sister magazine. And this is just the start; before too long I can see *Works* becoming something *really* big. ❑

## FLICKERS'N'FRAMES #7-8

**A4, 22pp, £1 each from John Peters, 299 Southway Drive, Southway, Plymouth, Devon PL6 6QN**

◆◆◆

*Flickers'n'Frames* is a magazine that refuses to stand still. There's still the usual up-to-the-minute cinema information about who's filming what for whom, the book and video reviews and all the other news, all presented in John's very distinctive and easy-to-read style.

Now, he's doubled the page count to include music articles and short pieces of fiction in the package as well. D.F. Lewis has the honour of inaugurating the fiction content in #7, which he does in particularly gruesome style with "Raw Youth", plus there's a fine Jack the Ripper spin-off from Mr Peters as well.

In #8 Des is joined by John Light and Martin Brice, whilst on the music front Mike Ashley follows up Dave W. Hughes' Pere Ubu article with an appraisal of Japanese synthesiser wizard Kitaro. Illustrators Dallas Goffin and Alan Hunter are proud additions to the line-up, and Kevin Lyons takes an in-depth look at Dario Argento's World of Horror.

John Peters packs a heck of a lot into each issue of Flickers'n'Frames, at the same time proving you don't need £10,000 of computing equipment to produce an attractive and very readable magazine. ❑

## PANDEMONIUM #16

**A5, 72pp, 75p from Matthew de Monti, 42 Kings Lane, Little Harrowden, Wellingborough, Northants NN9 5BL**

A nifty role-playing magazine devoted to *Tunnels and Trolls* in particular, with game theory discussion and scenarios in which to take part.

If the gaming is not to your taste, there's also some interesting background articles on arctic conditions and the evolution of medieval armour. With an on-going fantasy strip by Garen Ewing and fiction by Chris Challis and the brutal John Purdie as well, there's something here for everyone. ❑

## RATTLER'S TALE #3-4

**A5, #3 40pp, #4 24pp, 6/£5 from Anthony North Enterprises, BCM Keyhole, London WC1N 3XX.**

*Rattler's Tale* is a magazine designed to bring the fireside philosopher and storyteller back to prominence. In those days, when everyone took turns in telling a story, it didn't matter so much *how* the story was told, so long as the tale itself was entertaining.

Designed principally as an outlet for the novice writer, *Rattler's Tale* continues the tradition of the amateur storyteller and the importance of entertainment in preference to style. In restricting the stories here to 500 words in length however, Mr North gives no opportunity for his writers to set up a rattling good yarn to keep the audience enthralled.

Instead, the stories almost without exception rely on the technique of a sudden revelation to provide the twist in the tale and tie things up nicely. The Army Captain preparing his men for battle turns out to be leading his team out to play cricket, or the victim of sexual assault turns out to be an android designed to catch rapists.

Like a good joke, it's enjoyable the first time, but when it's repeated too often it becomes boring and predictable, making it impossible to read the magazine in a single sitting.

The non-fiction side of *Rattler' Tale* similarly lacks any great originality. The problem with armchair philosophy is that it rarely gets further than broad generalisations based on one person's limited experience, and unfortunately the articles on such topics as the nature of perception, water dowsing and the decay of modern society seem rather too half-baked to be taken as seriously as they are intended.

Many of the stories and most of the non-fiction in these two issues was written by Anthony North himself, which suggests he is either short of contributions or else considers the magazine to be more a vehicle for work of his own unpublished elsewhere. Even so, any publication specifically intended to promote novice writers, and which also pays them for their contributions, is to be commended.

In this case, though, a tighter editorial rein might be beneficial. *Rattler's Tale* probably goes down a storm on the

coffee-morning circuit, but in the wider context of speculative fiction publishing it falls rather short of its billing as "a voyage of the imagination". ❑

## THE SCANNER #6-8

**A4, 24pp, £1:50 each from Chris James, 4 Dover Road, East Cowes, Isle of Wight PO32 6RG** ◆◆◆

Undeterred by recent hard-nosed criticism, *The Scanner* bounces back to doing what it does best. Granted, the theme issue idea worked well in #4 with dystopian futures, but #6's religious theme led them too far out of their depth and the overall quality of the magazine suffered accordingly.

*The Scanner* gets back on course in #7 with good stories by Ian Watson and Iain Layden, the Duncan Adams contribution spoiled only by a trite and patronising endnote best left on the cutting-room floor. David Alexander's article "William Gibson Overdrive", is a unique attempt to appraise Gibson's fictional world by using a similar style of writing. More an impression than a review, Alexander recreates Gibson's atmosphere with an insight that makes his article refreshing and entertaining at a time when everything seemed to have been said about cyberpunk already.

With #8 the upward trend continues, pride of place this issue going to DW Hughes' "The Song of the Shapes". Reminiscent of Ballard in his mystic period of loony spacemen and empty swimming pools, this story is one of the best *The Scanner* has ever published, and shows how fast Dave Hughes is maturing as a writer. It's a shame they put such a good story at the front of the magazine, as it spoils the enjoyment of the more light-hearted pieces that follow, making their humour more interesting than entertaining.

One of the highlights of *The Scanner* is the "S.F. Literature We Can Do Without" column, which this issue takes a few potshots at *2061: Odyssey Three*. It's not easy to make such an article wholly analytic and avoid degenerating into unsubstantiated tirade and sometimes, as in #6, the piece falls short of the mark. When it *does* work, as is more often than not the case, its irreverence and candour is something akin to *Q* magazine's "Who the hell does ... think he is?"

Although #8 is arguably the best issue so far, both in terms of content and appearance, the weakest link is most noticeably the artwork and the illustrations. Once they've managed to clear that hurdle there should be nothing to stop *The Scanner* coming along in leaps and bounds. ❑



## DARK REGIONS #3

**A4, 68pp, $4 from Dark Regions, PO Box 6301, Concord, CA 94524, USA**

With an emphasis on horror and dark fantasy, *Dark Regions* is one of many American magazines in this field which serve up the goods in a steady, dependable fashion.

Well-known horror author J.N. Williamson contributes an informative and amusing insight into the various attitudes displayed by students he's taught on creative writing courses, and the vast difference he's found between those who have talent and those who succeed through perseverance.

Two more established authors Mort Castle and Joe Lansdale lead the way for the fiction, especially the latter with his tale of fear and panic in "The Junkyard".

They are backed up by other lesser-known writers, most notably Susan Lilas Wiggs, Sandra Black and Esther Leiper, whose "The Permanent Occupants" has a supernatural theme that seems to owe much to native Indian magic and ➢

# World status

## FACTSHEET FIVE #32-34

**A4, 108pp, $3 from Mike Gunderloy, 6 Arizona Avenue, Rensselaer, NY 12144-4502, USA**

Regular readers of this column must be getting pretty tired of me enthusing over *Factsheet Five* all the time, but it still has to be said that this magazine is totally unique, and – if that's possible – getting better with every issue.

The first thing that always impresses is the breadth and scope of the reviews in *Factsheet Five*. Even a casual flick through becomes a hypnotic and fantastic journey through American subculture. Over 500 magazines of such diverse topics as *Outlaw Biker Tattoo Review* "lots of amazing skin art", *Dumpster Times* "everything from anarchy to the Kinks" and *The Amateur Computerist* "an experiment in bringing computing ideas to the shop floor grassroots", to *The American Gay Atheist* "not afraid to come out of the closet", *Fantasy Federation* "for the frustrated booking agent that lurks inside of many wrestling fans" and *Simple Cooking* "a delightful trip through solid American food".

Dig deeper, and there's as many pages again devoted to separate sections for comics and music fanzines, as well as music and software reviews, and a very lively correspondence page.

*Factsheet Five* has a circulation now touching on 10,000 – that's about the same as *Interzone*. But the great thing about this magazine is that it puts you in touch with thousands of people who care enough about something to get off their backsides and do something positive about it. Though the reviews are succinct, often no more than 150 words, they are specifically designed to hook readers up with things they would be interested in reading.

Whilst much of the material received comes from within the USA, the ever increasing volume of goods received by *Factsheet Five* from overseas, including the UK, Germany and Australia, means that this magazine is now rapidly achieving world status as a reference journal for independent, alternative and privately produced publications.

Not only this, but editor Mike Gunderloy manages to cope with what must be a phenomenal workload to maintain a bimonthly schedule, so that the information contained in the magazine is rarely out of date.

But you shouldn't need me to rave on about *Factsheet Five* – just dip in and find out for yourself. ❑

superstition. Illustrations by artists such as Rodger Gerberding and Alfred Klosterman complete the package.

In each case, the stories are well-crafted and narrated, but too dependent on the supernatural and ghoulish – rather than real-world terror of man's cruelty to man – to be truly horrifying. With the layout somewhat loose in places as well, it still lacks the final panache needed to elevate it into the field of excellence, but it's solid read that's sure to satisfy. ❑

## ELLIPSIS... #2

**A5, 96pp perfect bound, $7:95 from Ellipsis Press, 1176 East Campbell Avenue, Campbell CA 95008, USA. £2:50 ◆◆◆**

*Ellipsis* is a magazine that immediately impresses, even before you start reading. Maintaining a continuity of design with #1, this issue sports a classy two-colour cover, which with the perfect binding gives it more the feel of a book than a magazine. Inside, the typeset pages are laid out like a book, but with the greater openness of a journal.

The content also maintains the high standards established in the premier issue. To describe the fiction as "mainstream" would be a gross over-generalisation, for although the majority are rooted in the real world, their subject matter and handling cover such a wide range from straight fiction to whimsy essays and metafiction that even the editors can only get as close as calling it "something with a little topspin to it".

What I like about *Ellipsis* is that it shows what can be done with fiction once the false category boundaries have been swept to one side and writers are left to get on with what they do best – writing. If you're wanting to broaden your reading base, then *Ellipsis* is an ideal place to start, its excellence of content and presentation making a proud addition to any bookshelf. ❑

## NOVA EXPRESS Vol 2 #2,4

**A4, 28pp. Vol 2 #2 $2:50, Vol 2 #4 $3 from Nova Express, PO Box 27231, Austin, Texas 78755-2231, USA**

The thing I liked about *Nova Express* right from the start was its lack of pretensions. That doesn't mean it's not up to much – quite the opposite. What I do mean is there's no smart-alec reviewer showing how to destroy a book and still look clever, no sycophantic interviewers just out to display their extensive knowledge of a specific writer.

Each issue takes on a specific theme or writer. Vol 2 #2, for example, examines the 'Steampunk' movement with interviews with James Blaylock and K.W. Jeter, whilst #4 talks to John Kessel. In each case, the conversation is wide-ranging, with a relaxed no-bullshit approach on both sides that makes the conversation entertaining, informative and interesting.

Backing up the discussion in each case is an exhaustive bibliography of past and present publications, which also lists forthcoming books and stories. The format of these listings is clear and concise, making them an invaluable resource for fans or collectors.

Overall, the package is very smart, typeset and with a solid internal design that many other text-intensive publications would do well to study. A consistently good magazine, *Nova Express* is one to look out for. ❑

## READY MADE EXOTIC WORLD #1

**A5, 48pp, $3 from RMXW, PO Box 3987, Mpls., MN 55403, USA**

"You don't have to make up the world, you just go out and find it. And then you have this ready made, exotic world."

Editor Luke McGuff took these words, spoken by Tim Powers at the Texas SF convention Armadillocon, as an endorsement of going out, seeking new experiences, trying and adapting. What he came up with is *RMXW*, a follow-up to his earlier magazine *Live From the Stagger Café*.

The short stories, poetry and artwork that Luke has gathered together cover that wide range of experiences, in a way that reminded me somewhat of *Global Tapestry* in the UK. The content ranges from Rudy Rucker and Moe Flaherty's memories of childhood and adolescence to Ruggero Maggi's report on the Hiroshima Shadow Project in 1988. There's Bill Norris's "Letter from Kenya", a poignant account of his work in the Peace Corps there, and an exposé by Project Censored of the top ten under-reported news stories of 1988 according to a national panel of media experts.

*RMXW* is not SF and nor does it pretend to be, for as Tim Powers said, there's enough living to be done in our own world without looking to escape elsewhere. That alone should be reason enough to stop for a moment to savour the experiences of those who have lived more fully than ourselves. ❑

## SCIENCE FICTION EYE #5

**A4, 108pp, $3:50 from Science Fiction Eye, PO Box 43244, Washington, DC 20010-9244, USA £3; 4/£11 ◆◆◆**

This magazine has already established a reputation as the state-of-the-art critical journal, and, if the line-up sported by this issue is a reflection of earlier issues, it's not hard to see why.

Charles Platt ponders the sorry state of modern SF in "The Rape of Science Fiction" assessing the damage done to the genre over recent years and laying the blame at some very large doors.

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John Shirley and Bruce Sterling for their part take the damage as read and choose instead to look to the future of SF, Shirley to the small press and independent publishers in what he terms the SF Underground, and Sterling to where SF can learn from other less rigid genres.

To have two successful authors interview each other runs the immediate risk of degenerating into mutual self-congratulation, and Howard Waldrop and Lewis Shiner sail pretty close to the wind in what has to be the weakest section of this issue. To be fair they do make some interesting and valid points, but half-way through with six pages still to go it does get rather self-indulgent.

Richard Kadrey and Paul di Filippo discuss immortality and the imitators of Pynchon respectively, whilst Lucius Shepard, Harlan Ellison and Orson Scott Card are among those who discuss topics kicked up by the previous issue.

In a journal such as this it would be easy to let the egos of big-name writers take over and spoil the fun for the rest of us. It is therefore to the credit of editors Dan Steffan and Steve Brown that they manage the content with aplomb and choose their contributors with care. This in turn creates a balanced production of such repute, intelligent without being too academic, and – with the exception of the Waldrop/Shiner interview – critical without being pretentious or patronising. ❑

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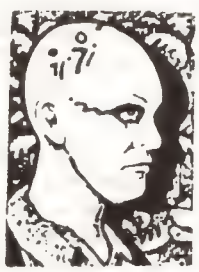
*Mike Gunderloy, FACTSHEET FIVE*



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# Dismal avant-garde crap

*From:* **John Duffield, Herford**

I feel depressed about **BBR** #14.

OK, "Devil's Advocate" by David William Sheridan was a good read if not utterly blindingly original, but man, the rest of the stories were typical of the dismal avant-garde crap that's sitting up in granny's bed pretending to be F&SF.

And I detect a real bad stink in your editorial, especially the bit that goes: *"SF still has a bad public image thanks to the overbearing influence of the mass media, so it's up to the small press now to take on the task of promoting SF as serious literature"*. Pooh, there's a piece of glib, politicised doublespeak if ever I heard it. Let me translate: "*SF shouldn't be entertaining, it should be piss fucking miserable instead, full of guts, guilt and hopelessness because I and my clique think that's the way to make people think about the problems facing the world*".

Now, I think it's the fiction-writer's duty to make the reader want to read on, gain satisfaction from what he's reading, *and* have something to think about to boot. But SF in the UK magazine market just isn't doing it, because somebody somewhere seems to have formed a mistaken impression of 'Serious Literature' (capital S capital L). 'Serious' doesn't mean litter-strewn scenarios, 'Literature' doesn't mean dispensing with prose constructed according to the rules of paragraphs and sentences, and together they needn't bar the reader from getting into the character's shoes to live the story in his head. Sure, SF played for laughs can be irritating, but that's no reason for it to be dim, grim, dismal and dire.

Remember *Midnight Caller* on TV, about the phone-in radio DJ? It gave the audience plenty to think about, it was serious, it was rivetting. And it offered hope and heart, saying "These are the problems, fight them". SF in the UK seems to be saying "These are the problems, roll over and die". I'd like to see Science Fiction in the UK taking a leaf out of the *Midnight Caller* book: if anybody out there wants to get a serious message over, slip it in with the *entertainment* like a thin-bladed stiletto; don't try to bludgeon the reader (grr, and Science Fiction, or *The Gate*) to death with it. ❑

*Chris Reed comments:*

I still stand by what I said about the bad public image of SF, and refer in particular to Kevin Lyons' excellent article on that matter in *New Visions* #1. As for the promotion of SF as serious literature, I think I've said enough in this issue's editorial already.

It's too much to expect to please everyone with every issue of **BBR**. If some people prefer to read *Dream, Works* or *Interzone* because they're more to their liking, then great – at least they're still reading and enjoying SF.

John Duffield is misguided in using his dissatisfaction with one issue's content to launch into his own bitterness and disillusion. Perhaps we're dealing with the battered ego of a writer who's received one rejection slip too many, I don't know.

I certainly don't believe **BBR** is representative of British SF, nor do I intend it to be. In choosing to perpetuate the jaded stereotype that British SF is gloomy and depressing, Mr Duffield conveniently forgets that some 30-40% of the magazine is regularly devoted to overseas writers and publications.

If John Duffield is nostalgic for the golden age of pulp 'entertainment', then it's not for me to challenge his taste, but it certainly doesn't give him leave to glibly dismiss as "crap" the more ambitious or inventive material that he doesn't like or maybe doesn't understand.

As Ursula Le Guin said in *Elle* magazine (March 1990), SF "is a perfect vehicle for exploring alternatives ... You can try things out. Although there is a lot of depressing science fiction it is innately a hopeful kind of fiction because you are saying there will be a future. It will be different, it may be depressing but it will change." ❑

*From:* **Nicholas Drage, Rushden**

Thank you for **BBR** #14. I haven't read any SF small press for a while and was beginning to miss it.

A definite good start with "Sequel". Actually, looking through **BBR**, I'll call it a 'doughnut' issue, great at the edges, nothing in the middle. "Synopsis of a Looking Glass Rebellion", not bad, but not as good as "Sequel". Things get worse with "Boys", I have read quite a lot of D.F. Lewis' work and I don't think I have liked any of it yet. "Instrument of the Dominant Gene" was a good idea but spoilt by a generally bad story, I found it a waste of time.

But I did finish it, unlike "London Is Calling" which didn't seem to be worth the trouble. "Another England" was better, a lot, lot better, a nice short SF story, simply told, with a twist in the tail. A lot like "Devil's Advocate", which was definitely the highlight of the issue, and would have been perfect if it hadn't been spoilt by Anne Stephen's rather bad art. In fact with the exception of Catherine Buburuz and Alfred Klosterman the standard of art was generally poor, in my opinion, and made **BBR** #14 look bad. ❑

*From:* **M. Bould, Plymouth**

As per usual, the best artwork in **BBR** #13 was SMS (except for the cover – his never seem to reproduce very clearly on the laminate), but at least this time he was given a run for his money by Kevin Cullen. The Brooks and Waarakangas illustrations closely following.

But I've said it before, and I'll say it again, the full page illustrations are a mistake especially when, like Mr Transue's, they suck. If that's a little harsh on him, he can find comfort in the fact that the only reason I've highlighted him rather than Dallas Goffin or Klosterman is that he wastes two pages whereas the latter only waste one each. And the Brooks probably only works so well because of the amount of white space around it.

Over all, Cullen is shown off to the best advantage, and his artwork genuinely adds something to Bey's story.

Dan Steffan wrote an interesting editorial on this and related issues regarding the outdated style of presentation in SF magazines right across the board, in *SF Eye* #5:

"Britain is currently the home of some truly exciting publishing ventures – *ID* magazine, *The Face*, *Escape*, *Q*, *Blitz* and many more – and *Interzone* could benefit enormously if its publishing co-op were to study these publications. A modern style of design coupled with their amazing fiction could produce the first truly great SF

magazine of the 1990s".

A comment which is relevant to every SF magazine I've ever seen.

So why not beat *Interzone* to it? You've published stuff which the pros wouldn't touch (including, he adds begrudgingly, a Dallas Goffin illustration which John Shirley reckoned would probably result in any US magazine carrying it getting banned). You've not wimped out like *Interzone* and all the rest of that emasculated crew. So maybe now's the time to break some more new ground, and while you may not have the budget or scale of operation to become "the first truly great SF magazine" etc, I can't help but feel you can play an important role in indicating the direction the whole field needs to go. I know you've got the bollocks to do it: prove it to the big guys. God knows, they need a kick up the arse. ❑

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*From:* **John Peters, Plymouth**

I have just finished reading **BBR** #14, my first experience of you magazine, and I enjoyed it very much. Surreal stories aren't really my forte – I have a job understanding them, and I'm very much a traditionalist in that a story must have a plot – so some of the fiction didn't work for me.

The best fiction, I think, was "Devil's Advocate" by David Sheridan. I really loved the black humour running through this piece, and good use of our clichéd ideas of Heaven and Hell's landscapes was made. "Sequel" was about as weird as I can take and I assume that it may have been influenced by Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo*.

I'm a sucker for alternate history, so Michael Cobley's "Synopsis of a Looking Glass Rebellion" was interesting – especially the Scots angles. David Memmott's "Instrument of the Dominant Gene" had a meaningless title but was intriguing to read and has a good go at intolerance. "Another England" is a little too near *Terminator* territory for my liking, but it is certainly well written.

I was very impressed with **BBR** – there's very few collections of fiction where I can say that I liked more than half the stories. I don't think I'm a fussy reader, but I do need something recognisable in a story for me to get into it. The artwork was of a high standard and seemed to match the fiction very well. ❑

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*From:* **t. Winter-Damon, Arizona**

Thank you for the contributor's copy of **BBR** #14 rec'd yesterday. The cover by Kevin Cullen was a knockout – composition, subject matter selected & sure, clean rendering made it a most dynamic & evocative threshold image! A bangup issue all told, an excellent mix of stories presented, a fine balance between traditional vs. nontraditional or experimental structurings with a range of content that should prove a heady jolt for even the most jaded intellects!

But it isn't *just* the fiction that has elevated **BBR** to its highly-regarded international reputation. Not by a lightyear! It's the exceptional layout, the artwork always *matched* with refined sensibility to each & every story, the spot illustrations, the varied typefaces used for headings – all those *so important* details where most magazines (small-press or mass-market) publications usually display some fatal flaw ... **BBR** is a true PROFESSIONAL: KEEP UP THE EXCELLENT WORK CHRIS!

Glad to hear the 5-minute review of **BBR** #13 was presented on Ukranian National radio to an audience of 50,000,000 listeners – what an indredible coup (well-deserved, I might add, too; **BBR** is *the best* small-press SF magazine I've seen to date ... *worldwide* ...)! Now, if just 1-in-50 would *subscribe*, I believe your circulation would outstrip even *OMNI*; if 1-in-100, you'd be in the *ASIMOV'S* neighborhood! ❑

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*From:* **Peter Tennant, Norfolk.**

Many thanks for sending me **BBR** #14 near the end of last year. Your magazine seems to look better with each issue. Its production values would put many professional magazines to shame. I love the clear type, clever layout and glossy cover look. You've got some excellent illustrations and used them to good effect. It's also nice to have a proper editorial upon occasion. The Alliance sounds like a good idea and my best wishes go to all concerned. Under its aegis I expect you to reach an even wider audience, deservedly so.

**BBR** is improving all the time. There may be hitches but the trend is to get bigger and better. Certainly I don't want to see you stop taking risks with **BBR**. The mix of experimental work with more traditional genre material helps give the magazine its unique identity. I just don't happen to think that all the experiments are worthwhile. Being different is to be applauded, but not when it's achieved at the cost of coherence. ❑

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*From:* **Tim Nickels, South Devon**

In #14 my favourites were the Ashley and the Winter-Damon/Webb. I thought Elliot Smith's "Ashphalt Seasons" was exceptional, as was Michael Cobley's story.

Again, I applaud your international mentality in the form of your Polish and Argentinian bits: the borders are coming down at every news bulletin it seems, and the need to broaden our horizons beyond the English-speaking axis (and, indeed, beyond Western Europe and the wretched 1992) is essential. Bravo. ❑

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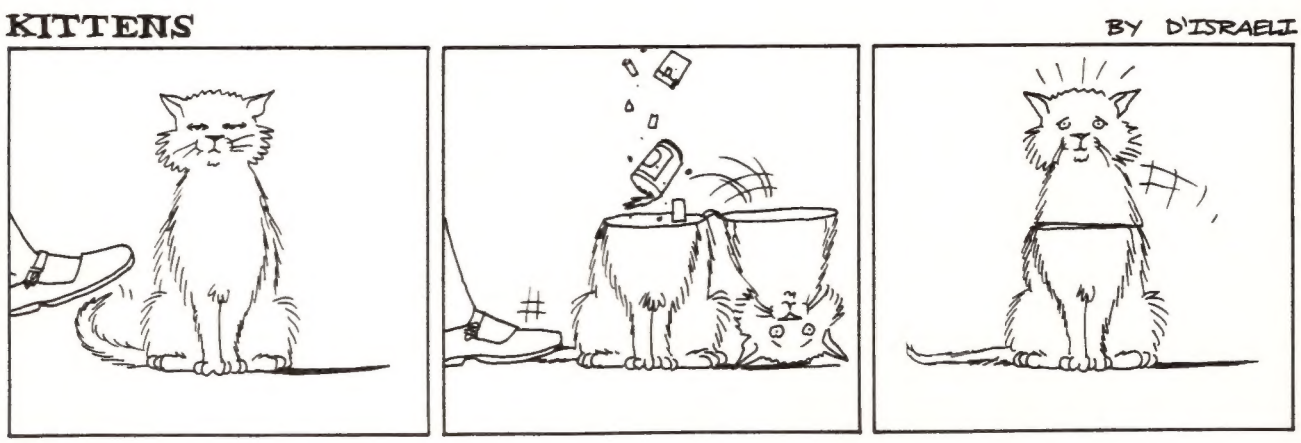
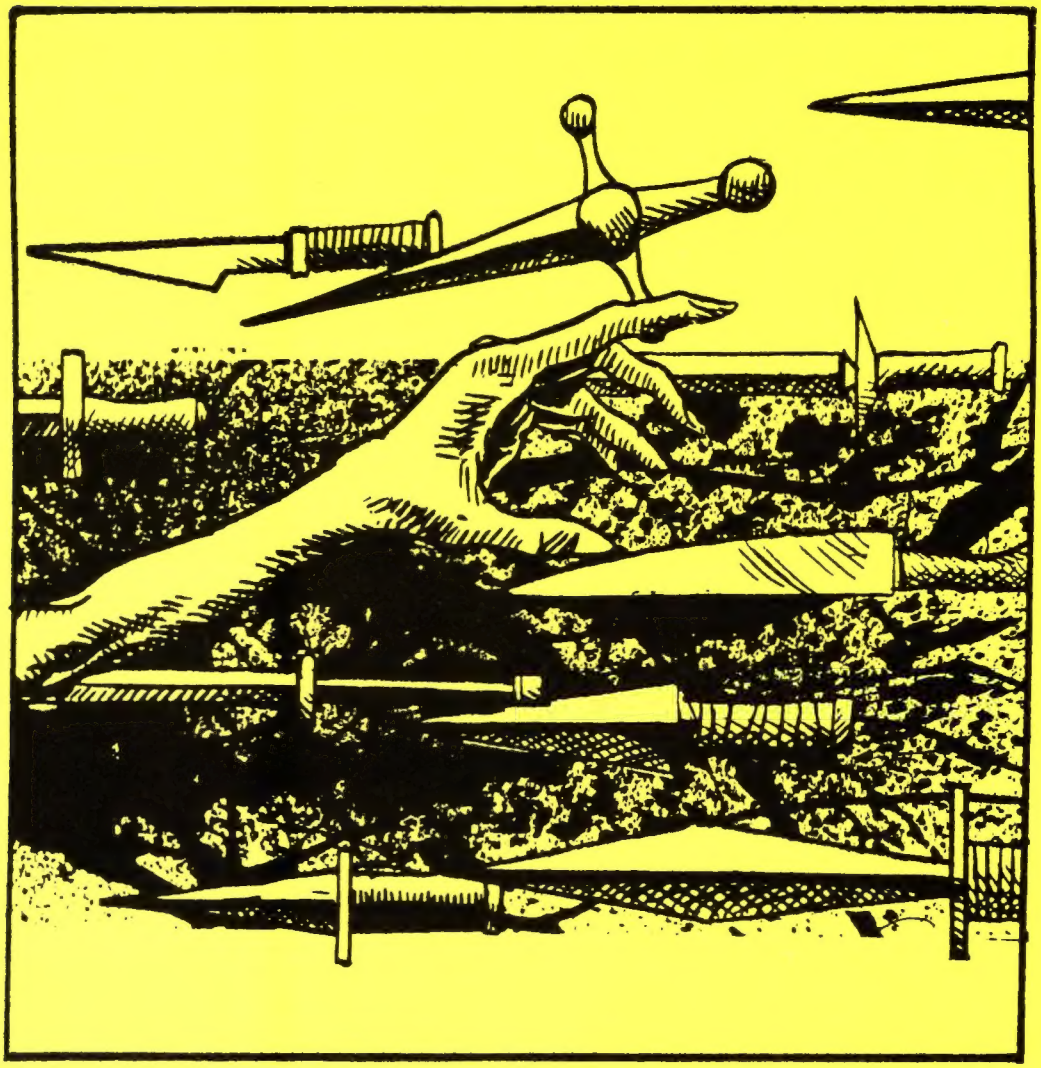


# A CUT ABOVE THE REST



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